

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change



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In today's episode, we'll talk about how critical it is to do internal work if you want to be as effective as possible as you navigate external challenges. Let's dive 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.

Lately, I've been thinking about what drew me to coaching. Why it was so meaningful to me that I decided to stop full-time clinical practice as a physician.

What's come to me is this, the reason I was drawn to coaching came from how practical and effective it was as an approach and as a set of tools. I will share that I still have a part of me that does a little micro-eye roll when I hear the phrase "life coach."

Because come on, there's some well-earned negative connotations related to corny, over-the-top positivity, pyramid schemes, and the idea that life coaching is this excessive indulgence for the elite.

Now, thankfully, things are changing. The research literature is really robust when it comes to the evidence that coaching works and that coaching is effective. The research has now caught up to my personal experience, which is that coaching in my own life and in the lives of my clients is kind of like the missing piece. For me, as I said, it was compelling enough to start my full-time clinical work.

A fundamental part of coaching, as well as things like therapy and meditation, and mindfulness, is the examination of internal things like our thoughts, emotions, beliefs; things that underpin our actions and our inaction.

But let's just think about this for a minute. What's the point of focusing on internal states of being and ways of thinking, in a world where so much outer work needs to be done? Isn't that perhaps just a waste of time and

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

energy? Isn't it just a distraction or an indulgence to muck about in the inner psyche when real-world problems exist? It isn't. And, here's why.

It's actually an essential part of being most effective with the outer work that needs to get done. So, let's carefully look at this issue together, shall we? In today's episode, we'll cover the topic of why inner work is helpful, and I'd argue essential, if you want to do the best external work possible.

I'll share three reasons inner work is important for getting through hard times with perspective and agency. So, let's make this really concrete so we don't get lost in all these abstract things. Take, for example, somebody loses their job. They get fired, their income stops, they have bills to pay, they've got kids to take care of, and they want to secure a new form of income, a new job.

All the inner work, meditation, mindfulness, coaching, therapy in the world, doesn't change the fact that they lost their job and their bills exist. So, why bother? Why meditate? Why get coaching? Why cultivate a mindfulness practice? Why go to therapy? Why?

Well, here's why. When you take time to examine your inner world, you increase your self-understanding. When you explore what you believe, what you think and why, when you explore what you feel and do and why, you develop a deeper understanding of what creates your experience. Furthermore, when you self-reflect or meditate or get coached, or do therapy, you change your relationship with your thoughts and your emotions.

So, instead of being along for the ride and going wherever your thoughts and emotions take you, you learn that you are not your thoughts. You learn that you are not your emotions. And in doing this, you learn the skill of observing yourself with a little bit of distance, so that you can observe the thoughts that auto-populate, you can observe the emotional knee-jerk responses.

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

And when you do, you can examine them more objectively. You can question them, and you can be present with them in a way that's very different from being the passive passenger to these thoughts and emotions. When this happens, this means you'll feel differently.

This is the critical part. When you feel differently, you are then able to approach your life circumstances differently. The job loss and the pending bills can be met head on with resourcefulness, which is so much more effective than despair. The inner work alone doesn't change the facts of reality, but the inner work is a catalyst to approach reality in a much more empowered way. This is how inner work begets agency.

So, how does all of this relate to habits? Self-understanding grows from awareness, and agency is the best fuel for making lasting changes to the most ingrained habits. Let me explain this a little bit. As you hear me say all the time, habits are not just our behaviors; they're not just your morning routine. Habits encompass the automatic ways that we think, feel, and act.

Most of our habituated ways of thinking, feeling, and acting are fueled by implicit beliefs; subconscious ideas and programming that we're not always explicitly aware of. Inner work makes this implicit stuff more explicit, which helps us see where we have control and where we don't. And when we see this, we can be more intentional about our habits.

So, it's the inner work of examining why we do what we do, and why we feel how we feel, that allows us to do more of what we want to do on purpose.

Now, let's back up a little bit. It is very easy to dismiss inner work. In the Western culture in which I was raised, and in which many of you were raised, our world is quite materialistic.

Additionally, the internet is full of pop psychology, personal development tips, and quick-fix life hacks. We also live in a world where the more productive we are, the happier we think we will be. But as many of us find

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

out the hard way when we get swept up in material pursuits and the so-called cult of productivity.

As Celeste Headley says in the subtitle of her book, *Do Nothing*, a lot of us have a life of quote, “Overworking, Overdoing, and Underliving.” Endquote. Not realizing this risk, it makes sense that in this day and age we habitually focus outward to the future, and on material things. Erroneously believing our happiness results when we do more, have more, produce more, and reach our goals.

We implicitly believe our happiness is based on the acquisition of things, how productive we are, and that happiness happens later. You know how it goes, “I’ll be happy when...” It’s understandable we think this way, right? It’s a cultural mindset we’re immersed in.

We can each probably recall times when we felt content and deeply satisfied, and we correlate it with external things: The relationship we had, a job, the amount of money that we had in the bank, a weight, a fitness level, a location we lived, a vacation, where on. So, in this way, it makes so much sense that when we feel discontent, or we feel anxiety, or we feel like something’s missing, that we would look for the solution outside of ourselves.

So, I’m going to say it again, it is very easy to dismiss doing inner work. But here’s the truth: the way we feel and what characterizes our lived experience actually arises from the inside. It arises from the complex interaction of our beliefs, our thoughts, and emotions. Or to use parts language, it comes from the parts of us that are present, consciously or subconsciously, in any given moment.

Now, it’s undeniable that the outside influences the inside. External material things influence our internal experience, kind of like a container influences the shape of its contents. The outside world is the container holding the soup, and the inside world? They’re the ingredients that make up what’s in the soup.

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

This is why you can feel lonely when you are surrounded by a roomful of friends. This is why you can feel a deep sense of peace amidst a dumpster fire of a day. This is why you can reach a long-sought-after goal and feel hollow and restless, instead of proud and satisfied like you thought you'd feel.

The internal goings-on, the implicit beliefs about the world and yourself, your conscious and subconscious thoughts, your rapid-fire emotional responses, it is those things and not the outside world that creates your lived experience.

So, at the heart of most everything you experience are things on the inside. And, to neglect the inner world is to put on blinders. As an aside, I'm pretty sure I had blinders on for a lot of my younger years. I didn't realize I had blinders on, but looking back, I can see it now.

Why is a focus on the inside, why is this internal focus so important? It's important because it's a strong reminder of where we actually have agency in our lives. We don't have control over the weather. We don't have control over other people. We don't have control over how we've been socialized. We don't have control over the thoughts that involuntarily percolate from our subconscious to our consciousness.

But we do have agency over how we respond to our automatic thoughts, how we respond to and interpret our emotions. We have agency with how we choose to see ourselves; be it with compassion and curiosity, or with judgment and resistance.

This agency is especially important during the hard times, like the example I gave of the job loss. In hard times, although it's nearly automatic to first look outside of us to see the problems that need to be remedied. We're actually better off when we include looking internally, as well.

Now, I argue that part of what makes any struggle or challenge extra difficult is the way we experience things where we literally don't have control. So, to make this real for you right now, I want you to take a minute

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

and think of some time that you've struggled. This could be some time in the past, or it might be how you're struggling right now, today.

Think of how much control you felt like you had or you feel like you've had, or how much of a sense of lack of control is there. Here's a fact, there are things in life where we have zero control. This includes other people; what they say, what they think, what they do, how they feel.

It includes how we're socialized, where we're born, our race, our genetics, our ancestry. It includes when people die, how people drive, the weather, how your family loads the dishwasher.

One of the most painful combinations is a combination of a situation where I don't have control and I have a felt sense of no agency. It's one thing to face things where we don't have control and feel acceptance, or feel determined, or feel relaxed.

It's another thing entirely to face things where we don't have control and feel overwhelmed, distressed, powerless, helpless, ashamed. Or even just be consumed with everyday nuisances, like frustration or discouragement.

To repeat, what makes any struggle or challenge extra difficult, is how we relate to situations where we don't have control. It's the *perceived* lack of control in the face of *actual* lack of control. And when you can do inner work on your thoughts, emotional processing, parts work, investigating, and gently interrogating limiting beliefs, you more clearly see where your real agency lies.

This is the argument for why inner work is absolutely essential, especially in hard times. Inner work during the hard times, as counterintuitive as it may seem, is critical.

This is because of three reasons. Number one, without inner work, it's easy to feel like a total victim to your circumstances.

Number two, without inner work, we're more likely to be reactionary, more stressed, and less creative about our problem-solving.

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

Number three, with inner work, you get clarity around what you can control, what you cannot, and how you want to show up in the face of these two things.

All of this brings more agency and more perspective. Now, this is not to say that you can neglect external work. Like, if you have a broken window in your house because a snowy tree limb fell and broke the glass, and your power is turned off and you need light and you need heat, popping onto your meditation pillow might not be the best first move. Getting coaching and examining your thinking, it comes after you get a tarp on that window, you call for help, and you get candles and blankets or a hotel.

If you're in an unsafe situation, you get your ass out of there before you start journaling. But when there's not an emergent acute event to address, neglecting inner work is self-sabotage.

Now, that said, our capitalistic, materialistic world makes it very easy to focus on the outside and focus on the future. No one really sits us down and systematically teaches us how to do inner work, unless your parents were therapists or coaches.

So, let's take a second and talk about what's required to prioritize inner work, especially during hard times, so you can recall your agency. To remember to do inner work and to recall agency requires one thing, it requires you to slow down.

I was just telling my small group that there are a few fundamentals that I come back to over and over and over again. And they are compassion, curiosity, and slowing down. Now, for some of you, just hearing 'slowing down' may feel really uncomfortable, especially when you're used to go-go-go and you already feel like you're drowning in your to-do list. I can so relate to this.

Just this morning, I had this happily purring cat, warm, sitting in my lap, and my daughter came into my office. She wanted to lay her head down on the cat on me. I watched myself get really tense. A part of me saw her

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

presence as this impediment to making progress. A part of me just wanted her to go away and didn't want to be interrupted.

I didn't want to slow down; I didn't want to pivot. I didn't want to pause, even if it meant I might get to savor a sweet, tender moment of my daughter wanting to be with me and wanting to 'ooh and ahh' all over this sweet, little cat. Slowing down seemed awful, to a part of me.

So, if when I mention 'slowing down' a part of you winces, or you cannot fathom it, or it just seems like you don't have time to slow down, that is totally normal. Just as no one sat us down and told us the importance of examining our inner world, or explained to us how to do it. No one usually sits us down and teaches us the power of slowing down.

Let me sell you on it, and then tell you how to do it. When you are overworking, busying, overthinking, tidying, running around like a chicken with your head cut off... When you constantly have something coming in or entertaining you, like a podcast or an audiobook, music, scrolling, you don't have the bandwidth mentally or emotionally to look at things objectively.

And in this state, you kind of see the world through a distorted lens. It's like trying to be present in a meeting while simultaneously reading a text. You're not fully present for either thing. Slowing down and pausing, and refraining from external input, even just for 60 seconds, can help because it lets the proverbial dust settle. So, you can be more present with whatever is there for you in the here and now.

When you slow down, it does a few things. First of all, you give yourself the chance to stop glossing over how bad you might feel. Secondly, you allow yourself to notice the quieter things going on in your mind and body. And you create a moment where you can ground yourself with a grounding technique. Like, for example, taking a few deep breaths or "box breaths".

When you slow down enough, you can detect what's going on with your emotions and your body, and your thinking. And you get the chance to see how the way your thinking is shaping the lens through which you're

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

interpreting absolutely everything. When you slow down, this enables you to discern where you have control and where you don't.

This is how you come to know yourself better and realize more clearly the role you have in shaping your experience. Here's something practical that you can do right now. The next time you find yourself reaching for a distraction, reaching for your phone, reaching to check your email, reaching for social media, busying yourself with tidying as a way to avoid some other task that you don't want to do, don't. Refrain.

This could be when you're at the grocery store, and you're in line and you're bored, and you grab for your phone. Or you're in a meeting and you're a bit restless, and you repetitively check your pager or your email. Or it might be right before bed, when it's time to sleep, and you pick up your phone to do one more Instagram check, one New York Times game, or one more page in your book. It might be when you're in your car and you're about to go into work, or you're about to go home.

I want you to just stop for 60 seconds; take a breath or two, and see what's present for you inside. Now, what do I mean by "inside"? By inside, I mean, how does your body feel? What sensations are you experiencing? Check in with what thoughts you have in your mind. Check to see if there's a particular emotion present. See if, when you are still for that minute, you have any memories or images bubble to the surface.

This tiny moment to check inside may seem too insignificant when it comes to something so bold as recalling your agency. But here's the thing, it's actually the paramount first step. When you can just slow down enough to be present with what is there for you, without fixing it, without analyzing it, without distracting yourself from it, you bring the opportunity for awareness. And that awareness is the prerequisite for deeper self-understanding.

So, the take-home message from this episode is that what goes on inside matters. Neglecting the inside makes it so much harder to make external changes. In hard times, slowing down, checking in; these are absolutely

Ep #195: Inner Work Is the Foundation for Outer Change

essential. They will help you show up, and help you do what you need to do externally from a totally different way of feeling.

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.