

Ep #197: The Habit of Minimizing: Stop Downplaying Hard Things



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

[Habits On Purpose](#) with Kristi Angevine

Ep #197: The Habit of Minimizing: Stop Downplaying Hard Things

Today's episode is about the habit of minimizing hard and negative experiences. Let's dive into what that means and how it shows up for you.

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, everybody. Today, I want to shine a light on the habit of minimizing difficult things with the goal of you starting to notice where you might be doing this. Now, in Episode 57, I discussed minimizing as a habit in terms of downplaying success and ignoring progress.

Today is going to be about the other aspect of minimizing, and that is minimizing difficulties. I'm going to explain what minimizing as a habit is, I'll elaborate on how it looks, and why we do it, so you can start noticing your tendency to do this. And if you don't personally have this tendency, then you're going to understand better when you see others doing it. If you haven't listened to Episode 57 it's a corollary to this one, so after you listen to this one, go back and check it out.

Let me first start with defining what I mean by minimizing difficulties. To minimize simply means to make something smaller, as in minimizing the font. As a habit, it can be the act of shrinking the real significance of an achievement, or dismissing or ignoring progress, which is what I get deep into in Episode 57.

Minimizing can also be the act of dismissing difficulties, reducing the intensity or the importance of an experience. It can also be reframing events as less impactful than they actually were. Now, there are other ways that we can minimize, and I just want to clarify one thing.

Today, I'm not talking about the habit of minimizing how hard something will be and thus not preparing for it. Like, "Oh, that test is just going to be a piece of cake. I can just study for it later, or maybe the night before." This type of minimizing is where you don't honestly assess what you need to do

Ep #197: The Habit of Minimizing: Stop Downplaying Hard Things

to prepare for something, therefore you are unprepared. This is its own distinct tendency.

What I'm talking about today is minimizing how difficult something actually was, and diluting how significant or how challenging something was. Let's make this real. How does this show up? Here's a couple of examples.

Let's say you go through some experience that was really excruciating. It required so much of you. It left you totally exhausted. And afterwards, to other people, you just shrug it off. You say things like, "Yeah, I mean, it was a little stressful, and we had a lot of moving parts. But really, it was just par for the course."

Another example, you go through something that's really difficult for you. Say, you're a teacher. You got yourself, your class, and your colleagues through COVID. Or maybe you just got through an ordinary year where you had too much to do, too few resources, and you weren't able to give attention to the kids in the way that you'd like. Then, at the end of the day you say, "It was no big deal."

Or if you're a physician, and you take 24-hour calls or weekend calls, and you have an ass kicker of a call shift. Then somebody asks you, "Oh, how'd it go?" You say, "Well, there were a few tricky moments, but it was fine," even though your experience of it was not fine; it was far from fine.

You might have this habit of minimizing difficult things if you often say, "It's just what we do." So, say your department is understaffed and the administration expects you to do more with less, and you know that it's not safe, much less functional.

Yet, you and your colleagues, you rise to the occasion. And as you rise, the bar keeps getting raised. But you keep chugging along saying, "You know what? This is how we do it. It's just what we do. We do hard things. It's a normal day at the office."

Now, oftentimes, this habit of minimizing how difficult something is, is very insidious. These examples are quite obvious. Because it's a very difficult

Ep #197: The Habit of Minimizing: Stop Downplaying Hard Things

experience, and what you say about it to yourself and to others is very different from what you actually live. But how can you know you're doing this if it's actually insidious?

Well, the way you know that you're minimizing challenges is by how you feel. Usually, there will be a detectable difference between genuinely saying something that was really no big deal and pretending something was no big deal.

In one case, it's just a matter of fact; you're honestly assessing something was just not a big deal. And in the other case, there's a bit of strain. There's the act of something being suppressed. There might even be a self-consciousness or a quiet anxiety in the background.

So, let's talk a little bit about why we might do this. Habitually minimizing how hard something is, to yourself and in front of others, happens for a variety of reasons. First of all, you might just want to appear capable and strong. You might want to maintain a certain image, which is basically a public-facing facade.

You might want to avoid being seen as weak or vulnerable, or God forbid, as a complainer. Minimizing difficulty can be a maneuver to avoid being judged or rejected. When no one around you talks about how hard their clinic experience is, or how hard their call shift is, voicing a different opinion is a little bit like being a whistleblower. You stand out. You have departed from the company line, so to speak. That can be quite difficult if subconsciously, you prefer to fit in.

Now, another reason that you might do this is you might believe that sharing your honest appraisal is going to burden other people. The last thing you want to do is be a buzzkill and rain on somebody's parade.

Also, if you don't know how to process difficult emotions, if you just can shrug them off and move on, which is kind of the motto of the very glorified, very American rugged individualist, 'just move on,' if you do that, then you don't actually have to deal with an uncomfortable feeling.

Ep #197: The Habit of Minimizing: Stop Downplaying Hard Things

And if you don't know how to deal with an uncomfortable feeling, that's really functional. You might minimize difficult things simply because it's a very crafty way that you've learned to cope. Notice here, minimizing the significance of something is parallel to habitually compartmentalizing traumas.

When we compartmentalize something traumatic, we're mentally setting aside some sort of distress in order to cope. And on one hand, it can have a benefit. Because if you need to get through the next five minutes, you can set something to the side briefly. But over time, if it's done repetitively, done chronically, when we do this, it actually prevents us from being eyes wide open about our lived experience.

Now, there are even other reasons why you might minimize the difficulty of something. You might have the tendency to always look on the bright side and to see the good, and you might believe that dwelling on the negative just isn't useful. So, when you go through something hard, an honest appraisal of how hard it was sort of calls your glass-half-full paradigm into question. So, you avoid it.

Or see if you can relate to this. You might have a very keen awareness that your economic or social privilege is extremely high, and you might compare your challenges to extreme challenges. Like, you compare your really difficult call shift, or getting through COVID, to people who are surviving in war zones, people who are in slavery or are being trafficked, to people who don't have access to running water. And so, you poo-poo your difficulty as just first-world whining.

When you do this, you think you're giving yourself sort of a framework to give yourself perspective, so that you can put your suffering in the perspective of the "10,000-foot view." But in actuality, what this does is a bit of denialism.

The last reason that I see the habit of minimizing difficulties happen is it can stem from a legacy burden that we absorbed from culture. Where we have

Ep #197: The Habit of Minimizing: Stop Downplaying Hard Things

the belief that we have to be okay all of the time, and that it's deeply unsafe, and it's frankly, just not okay, to publicly be not okay.

So, these are some of the reasons why you might minimize how hard something is. But who cares? Maybe it's just not a big deal, right? You just minimize how hard something is and move on.

Well, there are some potential consequences, some of which are quite grave. When you repetitively dismiss how hard something is, you're repetitively pretending and glossing over something. This runs the risk of you inadvertently disconnecting from yourself and what you actually experience.

Now, if you do this for a few weeks, it's probably no big deal. But if you do this for decades, it's a recipe for not trusting yourself or your perception. It's a recipe for staying in situations that you don't want to be in. And it also can lead you to possibly gaslighting yourself.

Where you feel awful, but you deny that anything is actually that hard. And then, when you do that, you don't have a cohesive explanation for why you're struggling, so in an effort to make things make sense you conclude that there must be something wrong with you.

Do this for decades, and you become a collector of unresolved distress. It's kind of like hoarding. Or keeping a bunch of external clutter like piles of paper that you think you'll go through one day. Except in this situation, you have internal closets full of emotional loose ends.

Minimizing the difficulty of your own experience is, in essence, a whitewashing, or a denying of the existence of something that is real. It's kind of like when something happens, some terrible tragedy, and the version that we see in the news is a little bit diluted.

It's a little bit softer than what actually happened, and we don't know that till later, right? But this softer version is there so as not to perhaps make public perception of someone or something "bad." When we minimize the difficulty of our own experience, we're doing that same thing.

Ep #197: The Habit of Minimizing: Stop Downplaying Hard Things

Another consequence is that you risk perpetuating a facade for others. So think about this: if everybody is minimizing the true difficulty of something and no one is being honest about it, then collectively, we have a culture of dismissing, deluding, minimizing, pretending, lying, denying how bad things are.

And when everyone downplays how bad something is, it's never going to change. Which leads to a situation that is ripe for exploitation by those who benefit from this type of collective showing up, and doing a job with a smile, and denying how difficult things are.

Ultimately, the risk is disconnection from yourself, a lack of self-trust, unresolved stress, possibly unresolved trauma, and not changing or not leaving an unsavory or perhaps even, frankly, a toxic set of circumstances. This can be on the individual level or collectively as a culture.

So, minimizing the difficulty is not a benign thing. And hopefully, I've convinced you have the problematic nature of something that actually appears quite innocent. So, there's these bad consequences, but what's the benefit of stopping this habit?

When you're honest with yourself, you're no longer keeping stress fermenting on the proverbial "back shelf" of your psyche. You get the opportunity to practice processing your genuine experience, even if the experience is deeply distressing. You can process it, you can heal it, and then you can move forward, instead of just moving on after compartmentalizing.

When you stop minimizing the difficulty of something, you actually validate what is real. Instead of saying, "Oh, it was fine, it was totally fine," you say, "That was actually really tough. That was actually really overwhelming." When you're honest, this opens the door to real problem-solving.

When you stop minimizing, you're more honest, and you don't oversimplify complex things. You're transparent and sincere with yourself and with

Ep #197: The Habit of Minimizing: Stop Downplaying Hard Things

others. And you normalize challenges. You normalize difficulties. If it was hard for you, I guarantee you, it was also hard for others.

So, instead of pretending something was fine and going it alone, you open the door for connection and collaboration. And it takes courage to do this, but the risk of not doing it is quite high.

So, my question to you is this: Where do you minimize the difficulty, or minimize the impact of something in a way that's not actually genuine to your lived experience? What I want you to try this week is simply to notice where you're glossing over something that is no good. Where you're diluting how bad you think something is, either to yourself or just in your public-facing comments.

Just notice. Take a little inventory. Notice when it happens, and notice what you're thinking and how you feel when you're doing it. And then, if you want to stretch a little, what would be uncomfortable about not doing it, about not minimizing? So, enjoy noticing, and I will see 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.