

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress



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Today's episode focuses on where you're getting habit change wrong and what to do instead. It's as close to a set of instructions as I can get, and it's based on my observations over the years of studying habits and habit-change attempts. So, let's jump right 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.

Hello, hello, let's dive into today's topic. Today, I'm going to get really concrete and really granular about habit change and the problems that typically come with it, and the things to do instead.

I've been working with habits for a while now, and there are some classic mistakes I see over and over and over. There are some really foundational elements to making sustainable change that are notoriously absent when people endeavor to make a change.

This episode is my way of shining a light on all of it, so you can start looking out for the areas that you're making some of the most common mistakes, some of the things that I've personally done for ages myself, and you can start taking stock of where you're not laying a solid framework for realistic change.

As I was creating the content for this episode, I realized that in a future episode, I really want to dig into how all of this today connects to Internal Family Systems and “parts work”, and concepts in positive psychology. So, stay tuned for that.

Let's get started. In the words of Greg McKeown quote, “Remember, that if you don't prioritize your life, someone else will.” The way I see it, if you don't actively work to prioritize your life, your bad habits will run the show. Your bad habits are “someone else.” Because our soul-sucking habits are learned, socialized ways of being in the world.

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress

One key way to prioritize your own life is to learn how to create habits in your life that help you prioritize what matters. And this requires that we first have a good sense of the habits that are getting in the way of what we actually care about. So, let's start with these three mistakes of habit change. This is where we get habit change wrong.

Mistake number one: We think we need to go all in. So, we have a habit that we loathe, we want to change it so badly, and we want that change done yesterday. We see a massive gap between present-day us and our ideal. So, we set a goal, we set a bold goal, and we map out the plan, the perfect plan.

“Effective immediately, I'll get my work done on time. I'm going to take the stairs. I'm going to eat lunch with my door closed. I'm probably going to make my lunch from scratch. I'm going to meditate before I go to bed. I'm going to get my ass to the gym five days a week, because that feels so good.” Bold goal.

Or we might make what seems like less of a bold goal, a subtly overly bold goal that sounds like this, “Even if it's just a little bit of movement, I'm going to move my body five out of seven days a week. And I'm going to plan what I'm going to eat. I'm just going to track what I'm eating every day.”

Our goal might not sound over the top, but check this: if you've not been doing *any* of the things that are in your goal, and your life is such that even 50% of what you want to do would be a huge stretch, your goal is over the top.

Why do we do this? Well, sentiments like “go big or go home,” and “if you're going to do it, do it right.” These make shinier, fancier, bold goals, even though subtle, bold goals are really alluring. And as we do this, we dismiss smaller, more ordinary-sounding plans.

And then, if we're miserable enough, when we fantasize about the future, where everything in our bold goal is all settled, it's all figured out, it is a welcome relief to how we feel now. We get a hit of dopamine. It's genuine

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress

pleasure when we transport ourselves to the magical future that we want to be in instead of where we are.

Ordinary, average goals with more metered or realistic ideas, they just don't have the pizzazz that we're going for. When we think about them, they don't feel as great as those bolder ones. So, we go all in, or we tell ourselves that we *should* go all in. The problem is we overshoot.

When life does what life does, and we can't maintain this unrealistic plan that we set for ourselves, we yo-yo between overdoing and doing nothing. Ultimately, we make no forward progress. So, this is how thinking that we need to go all in is actually counterproductive.

Mistake number two: We overuse positive thinking. This is one of my favorite mistakes. Because when I first learned about some of the concepts in psychology in my undergrad classes, about how our thinking creates our feelings, and our thinking shapes how we view the world, it's the lens through which we experience things, it was very attractive to think, "You know what? If I just look at the world through a vantage point of my thinking, it's going to feel totally different. If I just think the right thoughts, it's going to feel great."

But there's an underbelly when we overuse this. We learn that thoughts create feelings and they shape our reality. What happens is, we end up embarking on a quest to tidy up our thoughts in order to make really great habits and have a great life.

And honestly, it might work for a while. But if it stops working, when it stops working, we're left discouraged and clueless as to what went wrong. And that queues self-blame, "If I could have just managed my mind better... If I would have been thinking better thoughts... If I would have just been looking at things through a better perspective, then things wouldn't feel so hard."

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress

Or things might work really well, but because we skipped over this deeper work, eventually the positivity is revealed to be a house of straw and not a sturdy brick house.

So, here's the truth: you can't manifest a new reality by painting positive thoughts over decades of deep beliefs. When you are drowning and you try to tell yourself, "I am whole, and I can do anything I set my mind to," it's like stopping to put on perfume when you just really need someone to throw you a life jacket or a lifeline.

For real change and deep seismic shifts to happen, you have to first really understand why you have the habits you have, and where your beliefs come from. You have to heal old wounds, address traumas, look eyes wide open at the hard stuff, and then and only then, your thinking naturally moves to "positive".

So, the first mistake in habit change is we believe we need to go all in in order to actually have change. And the second mistake is, we overuse positive thinking.

Mistake number three: We confuse intellectual understanding with application. Just because you've watched 50 videos about how to jump your mountain bike over an obstacle doesn't mean you can actually jump that obstacle; ask me how I know.

Likewise, knowing what you need to do to feel better, knowing the top five steps to change any habit, knowing that you need to get more sleep, knowing that you need to reflect on your goals and figure out what really matters, knowing that you need to say no, knowing that you need to set better boundaries, intellectually getting that mindset shapes experience doesn't mean that you actually know how to do these things in the trenches of a normal day.

When you're running behind and your scheduler ads on a patient that your partner dumped on you, and then your kid's school calls to tell you that your kid is sick, and someone left doughnuts in the break room, and your

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress

girlfriend calls to see if you want to get drinks instead of going to your spin class, this is when you need to know how to *apply* an idea.

You don't need to learn more things; P.S. You don't need more discipline. You just need to practice real-world application of the things you already know. And this helps you bridge the gap between what you know and actually implementing.

So, do you make any of these mistakes? Do you mistakenly believe that you have to go all in? Do you overly rely on positive reframes? Are you skimping on implementation? If you are, welcome to the club of all humans. These are common mistakes because we all do them.

But there's a way past them and a way to avoid them. Here are the four keys to a solid foundation to change your habits. These are the four things that if you don't do, you're going to be working from a really wobbly platform. They are so often missing, and they're, frankly, the reason that so many habit-change attempts crash and burn.

Number one: Meet yourself where you are. Number two: Regularly know what you're thinking and feeling. Number three: Use curiosity. And number four: Be open to, and actively pursue, trial and error. Let me explain all of these things so you understand what I'm saying.

Number one: Meet yourself where you are. This means take inventory of precisely where you are right now. Acknowledge where you are now. Meet yourself with kindness, even if you aren't where you'd like to be.

If you aren't clear on where you are, if you don't tend to yourself with compassion, in your genuine square one, you're likely to start a habit-change agenda in a hurry, and you're likely to do mistake number one and be really grandiose with your plans and unrealistic about what you need.

You must meet yourself where you are. This requires that you slow down, which is very difficult for some of us.

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress

Number two: Regularly check in with what you're feeling and thinking through your day. A lot of habit change advice is centered on behavioral change hacks and ignores thoughts and feelings. It's so easy for us to see thoughts and feelings of soft and psychobabble. And in truth, they are the cornerstone of change.

Why? Every pattern you have is created by what you're thinking and feeling. And every pattern you have is reinforced by what you think and feel. How we think and how we feel is often below our conscious awareness, and if you don't purposely check in, you will not know what's going on. And then, you're going to be trying to make change without access to critical data that you need.

So, how the heck do you do this? This is what we did in the 10-Day Habit Reset. And if you participated in that, you know what I'm talking about. If you didn't, we're going to do another one in the future. But this is what we did there, and this is what I teach my clients to do.

The Cliffs Notes version of how you can regularly check in and learn what you're thinking and feeling is this. A few times a day, check in and ask: What am I feeling? What am I thinking? And if you're triggered, overwhelmed, activated, flooded, stressed, whatever, you must have in your toolbox a way to emotionally regulate, get centered, and soothe your central nervous system.

Number three: Use curiosity. Curiosity is probably one of the most effective tools for 99% of all of our challenges. Being curious on purpose helps you understand your habits and how they make sense. Being curious helps you understand your emotions. It helps you figure out where your thinking and your beliefs come from.

Trying to go for a goal and make a change that lasts, without using curiosity, is like heading out on a road trip without gas. Or taking your electric car to a remote area that doesn't have charging stations. You will not get very far. You will depart, you will get to the point where you realize

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress

that you need a way to charge or fuel up your car, and you will have to turn right back around and go to where you started.

Number four: Trial and error. There is not one way to do things that works for everyone. Intellectually, we all know this, right? We know that everybody has to do things in a different way. But sometimes we forget this when we actually go to do the work. There's not one way that works for everyone, and there's not even one way to do things that will always work for you.

In one season of your life, one approach might work. In another season, on another day, in another year, something totally different will work. And you can't know what's going to work in advance of trying it. You must pick something, try it, see if it works. And if it does, do more of that. And if it doesn't, try something else.

This means you just have to pick something, try it, and then evaluate it. What we often do is, we believe there's a right thing, a perfect or most effective thing, and once we figure out what that is, then we'll start.

The problem is, this leaves us delaying getting started because we're looking for something that doesn't exist. And presuming that, once we find it, then we're going to feel ready and confident enough to get going with the work.

So, you have permission to literally flip a coin. Or make a list on a sheet of paper, close your eyes, and put your finger down on that paper, and start with whatever you land on. If you don't open yourself up to experimentation, you're not going to learn anything.

And the other critical part to trial and error is evaluation. This means trying something and looking back: Did it work? What worked? What didn't? What am I going to try again? What often happens is, even when we do start, if things don't work so great, we just stop.

We let things peter out instead of going, "Oh, huh, that didn't work last week. Cool, now I know. Now I'm going to try option B. Now I'm going to try

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress

option 77.” We stop. So, keep in mind that you might need to try five things, or 35 things, to find out what works for you.

And on a personal note, this just happened to me this week. In trying to figure out how I'm going to build in some exercise and some biking, I looked at my schedule, I found times that would actually work, I wrote it down on my schedule, and said, “This is the time, on this day, that I'm going to do this.” And then I told my family this is what I'm doing, so we can all sort of work around things.

When I look back, there are three times that I was planning on going for bike rides, but I didn't. It's very easy to say, “Well, it just didn't work. So, I'm not going to do that again,” and just stop trying. But what's most helpful is for me to go, “Oh, that particular thing, in this particular week, didn't work. Huh, why didn't it work? Okay, this might have gotten in the way. Alright, you know what I'm going to try? Next week. I'm going to try this.”

This is what you must keep in mind. You do not need to go all in, it is counterproductive. Go for small, boring, realistic steps if you really want seismic change. And even if your brain freaks out and finds that super uncomfortable, do it anyway.

Don't fall for the allure of positive reframes and overly rely on them; they are a trap. Instead, be open to what's real for you now. And just notice how you're currently thinking and what that currently produces for you.

Then, don't conflate intellectual understanding with real-life application. You have to prioritize concrete implementation over learning more stuff.

And then, meet yourself where you are, with compassion. It is the bedrock for doing anything going forward.

And then, regularly check in with what you're thinking, with what you're feeling. Use curiosity, and use trial and error, plus evaluation.

This is the blueprint that will help with real change. It is as close to a plug-and-play as you can get. And just because it's concrete and it's really

Ep #198: The Top Mistakes of Habit Change and 4 Keys for Real Progress

clear, does not mean that it's easy, and that's okay. You can handle hard things. You can handle new things. You can learn a different way.

If you need help along the way, do this work with a friend. The accountability and the shared experience is priceless. Or get yourself a coach, or join a program like *Habits On Purpose*. It will give you an extra set of eyes to see your blind spots, and it will support you to do the deeper work that is absolutely essential.

So this is an episode to re-listen to. But for now, I want you to pick one thing that you're going to look for, one mistake. I want you to pick one thing to work on. And then in a few days, literally look at your calendar at what's three days from today, check in, and evaluate how it's going. After you assess, pick another thing to look for or to work on. And then, I hope you have a beautiful rest of your day and a great rest of your 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.