

Ep #199: Reframe Your Narrative: Change What You Make Things Mean



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With Your Host

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Today is all about meaning-making. Is your meaning-making helpful, or is your meaning-making making things worse?

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.

Hi, everybody. Let's dive into today. Our experience of our life, and our experience of ourselves, is strongly shaped by the meaning that we give to things. In order to understand ourselves and understand the world, we assign meaning to things. To make things make sense, we give them a context.

And when we're not aware of what we're making things mean, we run the risk of letting old lessons, old stories, old narratives that no longer make sense or serve us dictate our experience. So, in order to be more deliberate about how we feel, how we show up, how we experience our life, we have to pay attention to what we're making things mean.

So, let's talk about this a little bit. We create interpretations and make meanings about all sorts of things. We make interpretations about facts, about our own thinking, about emotions, about results that we have in our life.

We make rain on a wedding day mean "good luck." We make someone's question at a meeting mean that they hate us. We make somebody else's question at a meeting mean that they're really interested in us. We make our partner leaving their cup of coffee out mean they don't care if we have extra work to do. We make our kids' eye rolling mean that they're rude, and they're going to become an entitled human who hates us.

When we are early for a deadline we make it mean that we're smart and organized. And when we are late, we make it mean that we're a scatterbrained dummy. We make the dollar amount in the bank mean that we're going to be fine, or that we are an abject failure. We make our anxiety

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mean that we're broken. We make our annoyance with one of our relatives mean that we're not a good family member.

We make the fact that we don't like volunteering at our kids' school mean that we're a bad mom. We make our desire to sleep and watch a movie mean that we're lazy. We make the number of things we've accomplished mean that we are efficient, or that we're behind.

Whatever it is that we make things mean affects how we feel and how we see ourselves. Which, in turn, affects how we behave and how we interact with the world. So, if I'm in a dinner party and I'm making small chat with somebody I don't know, and we have a silence in our conversation, and I make that silence mean that they don't want to talk to me, you can imagine how I might then perhaps do this:

"They don't want to talk to me. Hmm, why don't they want to talk to me? Oh, they don't want to talk to me because they think I'm dumb. I'm uninteresting. I am difficult to talk with. I don't have anything good to say. I am not very funny. If they think that, what if they're right? Oh, that would mean that I am uninteresting. I'm not likable. So clearly, I'm not valued. I'm not appreciated. I don't belong here. Everyone here must see the same thing."

And when this is what I make that pause in our conversation mean, I'll feel insecure, self-conscious, anxious, I definitely won't feel like I belong, and then everywhere I look, I'll see more of it. Because of how I feel in the moment, I'm going to struggle to interact. I'm not going to ask people questions. I'm going to withdraw. It'll be easy to interpret benign behavior on the part of other people as more proof about how unlikable I am, and this will snowball.

If we could go back in time we could probably trace this initial meaning-making about the silence back to some previous experiences where, indeed, silence actually did correspond to an experience where someone literally didn't like me. Perhaps the person even told me so. Think

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middle school awkwardness, cliques, and that soft bullying that happens in the hallways between classes, right?

So, if we take a lesson learned in middle school and use it as a meaning maker when we're in our 40s, it can be a set of blinders that closes us off from alternate ways of viewing the world and viewing ourselves. Logically, we all get it, right? Confirmation bias, cognitive distortion, cognitive behavioral therapy, ancient wisdom tell us that our thoughts are like glasses to change the way we experience things in the world and the way we see ourselves.

But our day-to-day life isn't one built on logic. Our body, our emotions, our limbic system, operate on the tried-and-true ideas that we have repeated for many, many, many years. Even if these ideas and these meaning makers create so much suffering.

So, here's the fun part of this. Just because we have a well-ingrained habit of making things mean one particular theme, it doesn't mean we have to keep it up. We could literally decide to make a new narrative. If I wanted, I could experiment with making silence at a dinner party mean that somebody is being thoughtful. I can experiment with thinking that they, too, feel unsure what to say, and that's normal.

I could experiment with making silence mean that they're distracted, and they're recalling something earlier in their day that was kind of difficult. Or I can make their silence mean that maybe they just have gas, and they're worried about public flatulence. Who knows, right? I can just pick and then experiment and see how that goes.

We are meaning-making creatures, and by habit, by default, we go back to the classic meaning that we've made for a long time. But we have agency, so we can decide to make things mean something else.

So, how do you go from meaning-making that is not useful, yet has been repeated for decades, to meaning-making this more useful, that actually serves you? We have to start with first unearthing the meanings that you

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give to things. And the way you do this is you start paying attention to the conclusions you make during the day.

Now, most of the conclusions that we make are so fast, they're essentially backstage in the proverbial backroom of our consciousness, so it takes a bit of effort to identify these conclusions. But the way you do this is you just ask yourself: What are the conclusions that I make a lot of the time? Is there a theme to what I make things mean? Just ask, and you'll start noticing.

And then, the next step is just ask: Is the meaning I'm giving to this experience, is it useful? Does it weigh me down? Does it make me feel incompetent, overwhelmed, and wrong? Or does it lift me up? Does it make me feel sturdy? Does it make me feel determined? Does it make me feel confident? Does it fuel me towards making decisions and moving forward? Or does it keep me stuck?

This week, I want you to start noticing what you make things mean. You're going to have a clue if these meaning makings are useful by how they make you feel. And then, after you have a good sense of what you make things mean, just consider the following: What would be different about your narrative if you always gave yourself the benefit of the doubt? What would change if you removed the self-criticism? What would shift if there was less cynicism in the meanings you gave things?

Now, to help you brainstorm on some intentional ways that you can look at yourself in the world, I'm going to offer you some of my favorite ways of looking at things. You're going to notice that these are not whitewashing, they are not finding a silver lining, and they are definitely not denialism.

I find those things really to be essential for me. Although I'm an optimist, I really bristle at things that sound syrupy sweet, where they flirt with kind of whitewashing or glossing over things to make them seem peachy keen and perfect, when they really, actually, aren't.

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So, my favorite meaning-maker prompts are usually pretty neutral-sounding, which makes them so much more accessible to me. First, for any struggle, challenge, mistake, disappointment, or fail, I find it so loving to think, “I did the very best with what I knew at the time.” The other variant is, “There was no possible way for me to know anything differently then. But now, I know better.

For self-compassion, it helps me to think, “What I went through was exquisitely difficult. No wonder it felt like it did. Experiencing XYZ is no easy task, so it's understandable that I felt... and did...”

For compassion for others, it really helps when I think, “I have no idea what this person has been through.”

For perspective, “I'm in the thick of learning so many new things right now. And learning is not supposed to be easy.”

For persistence, “On the other side of discomfort, learning and growth are inevitable.”

For curiosity, I love the phrase, “Isn't it interesting that...?”

So, this week, just to recap, I want you to start paying attention to the conclusions that you draw about other people, the conclusions you draw about yourself, and how these make you feel. When you're drawing conclusions, you are placing something in a context and giving it meaning. And sometimes this meaning is really useful. And other times, this meaning is just going to weigh you down, make you feel terrible, and make you feel stuck.

So consider, are you making things mean something that is useful? Or are you making things mean something that turns into a big obstacle for you? Remember, you can decide what you want to make things mean, and you don't have to swing on the pendulum all the way from tremendously negative to overly, fakely positive. But you get to find a middle ground that feels solid and sturdy for you.

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So, consider the prompts that I gave you for some of my favorite ways to look at things, and let me know what works for you. If you're not already on my email list, please go to HabitsOnPurpose.com, and you'll see a little box that says, "Join the email list."

If you're on the email list, you'll get emails from me that include really practical tips for how to change habits, ideas that I'm learning about, concepts that I'm thinking about, and really thought-provoking tools that I use in my coaching groups. It's a way for us to stay in touch, and for you to hear about all the different offerings that are coming up in the world of habits.

Enjoy the rest of your week, and I will talk to you next time. Take care, bye.

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.