

Ep #202: Reactivity Reset: A Mental and Emotional U-Turn



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With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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I'm your host, Kristi Angevine, and you're listening to what to do about reactivity.

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. All right, one of the most infuriating, frustrating things that I've personally experienced and that my private clients and my clients in my group coaching program experience is that feeling of being reactionary and reactive, particularly to the people you love most, or to close colleagues, or in public settings. Feeling reactive and reactionary can make you feel like you're out of control.

Sometimes we get reactionary when we are abruptly triggered. And then we go on to act in a really snippy, curt, irritable way. Other times, we're reactionary when we feel emotions, and we don't understand where they came from. And then we act in a way that later on we don't like. When we feel reactionary, it can make us want to change and control other people in order to feel better. And this reactivity can feel so intense that it can seem insurmountable to change.

So, if you can relate to this, this episode is perfect for you. I can't tell you how many years, if not decades, I have experienced feeling like I go from 0 to 60 where I am being really reactive. Or I just feel like I'm being reactionary to things without much intentionality. And this feels like it happens to me such that I look back and go, what the heck happened? And this out-of-control feeling is very disorienting. Many of my clients report it, and if this is you, today you're going to learn about an idea and a tool that are going to help reduce feeling reactive and help you understand what's going on when you do.

So to do this, I'm going to start off by sharing a metaphor that comes from driving a vehicle. So sometimes when you're driving along, you realize that you need to turn around. You realize you need to go somewhere else, and

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so you need to do a U-turn. Say you've missed your turn or there's a bunch of traffic that you see ahead, or you remember that you need to go somewhere besides where you're headed first, or you forgot something. So, you turn around, and you aim for this new desired location. This is just what we would call doing a U-turn when you're driving.

What I want to talk to you about today is the idea of doing a personal, mental, and emotional U-turn. Anytime that you get flustered, irritated, overwhelmed, triggered, feeling out of control, so that you can have clarity and give yourself a chance for a reset. Now, I'm not sure who coined the term U-turn first when it comes to a mental and emotional U-turn, but I first heard of it in the context of Internal Family Systems and Dr. Dick Schwartz.

So to understand a mental and emotional U-turn, I'm going to break down the U-turn that you make when you're driving, and then I'll relate it to a mental and emotional U-turn. And by the end of this, you're going to know exactly how to do a U-turn, and hopefully, I will sell you on the importance of doing them regularly.

So when you're driving, for a U-turn to happen, there are a few key steps. First, you need to perceive the need to turn your car around. You need to realize that you forgot something. You have to see the road construction and the traffic jam ahead. It must enter your consciousness that something is missing, that you've forgot something important, that there is something that exists somewhere else, and it's important enough to alter your trajectory, and you need to turn around.

Until you realize the need, what do you do? Well, you keep on driving. Sometimes right into the thick of a traffic jam. Bumper-to-bumper cars that you can no longer maneuver out of, that you then have to sit in until it resolves. Until you realize it, you keep driving further away from the hotel where you left your backpack, or further away from the gas station bathroom where you left your phone. So to do a U-turn when you're driving, you need to first realize the need and perceive the reason to do one.

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Next, once you realize that you need to do a U-turn, unless you're a professional rally racer, you actually need to slow down. You need to find a safe way to turn around. Maybe you use a roundabout, maybe you use a left turn into a parking lot. Maybe it's clear enough and it's legal enough to just do a U-turn in the middle of the road. You have to slow down and deliberately move your car so that you can actually do the U-turn. So once you realize you need a U-turn, you have to slow down.

Then, once you've done the U-turn and you've turned around, you need to keep in mind where you're headed, and you need to keep moving towards that new destination or keep moving in that new direction.

You know how in your navigation system, if you have it programmed to one place, and then you realize that you need to run back somewhere where you've left your purse or you need to go somewhere else first and you turn around, you do your U-turn, but your navigation system keeps saying something like, "proceed to the route," or "at the next light, make a U-turn," trying to get you back onto your original route. And if you were to follow what your navigation system keeps telling you to do, then your U-turn that you made for a good reason was for naught.

So just like you need to change the programming and the destination in your GPS system or your GPS app, when you do a U-turn, you need to keep in mind where you're going and why.

So, to review, to do a U-turn when you're driving, you need to perceive the need for one. Next, you need to slow down. And finally, you have to keep in mind where you're headed and keep moving in that new direction, keep moving towards that new destination.

Now, why delve into the minutia of driving and making a U-turn? Well, the same components are at work with a mental and emotional U-turn. To do a mental and emotional U-turn, you need to first perceive the need for one. You next must slow down. And then you have to keep in mind your new focus. So let's discuss all this so you understand it.

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A mental emotional U-turn is where you pause and look away and redirect your attention from your outside environment to your inside environment. You turn your attention away from the situation or person in front of you and you direct your attention inward. You bring your awareness to what's happening in your mind and in your body and in your emotions. When you do a U-turn, you get curious. What is getting stirred up here? How come this is coming up for me in this particular situation?

When you do a U-turn, you better understand yourself. When you do a U-turn, you slow down the potential tidal wave of reactivity. And when you do this, you can also improve interpersonal relationships. Because when you pause, and you don't speak for a moment when you're really activated, you get a glimpse of what's going on for you before you re-engage, which can be so much easier for the people around us. And it's in this way that doing a U-turn helps with reactivity and helps with being reactionary by kind of slowing down time.

You know that saying by Viktor Frankl where he says, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. And in that space is our power to choose our response. And in our response lies our growth and our freedom." Well, when you pause to do a U-turn, you're lengthening that space between stimulus and response.

So what you're actually doing when you pause and do a U-turn is a stimulus is coming in, you're pausing because you notice something is coming up for you. You're investigating what's coming up for you. You are extending that space between your stimulus and your response. And therefore, instead of having a stimulus and then quickly, rapidly, urgently reacting, you're actually giving yourself the opportunity to respond instead of just reacting.

Now, there's another reason that doing a U-turn is really helpful. Doing a U-turn helps us all realize that external things are not actually the cause of our experience. External things that are really activating simply reveal that there's something worth exploring inside of us.

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And this is great news because when we realize that, then we don't have to feel like the only way to stop being triggered or the only way to feel better is to fix the things outside of us, or leave the circumstances in which we're triggered, or make people behave certain ways.

What we get to open ourselves up to is that there's something interesting, something fascinating going on internally inside us that just happens to come up in certain circumstances. And when we understand that better, that's where we can tap into our agency.

So one way to make it much more routine to practice doing a U-turn when you're feeling intense emotions is to regularly do U-turns or check-ins when you aren't feeling really activated.

So the way this works is through the day, you turn your attention inward and you ask yourself, what's coming up for me right now? How am I feeling? What is this emotion that's present for me? What's going on in my mind? What's going on in my body? What's my body feeling right now? When you do these type of routine check-ins, it makes it so much easier to do U-turns when the shit hits the fan.

Now, remember the three components of a driving U-turn? You need to perceive the need to do one. You must slow down, and you have to keep in mind your new focus.

So, for a mental emotional U-turn, that means you need to notice that you need to turn inward. In other words, you need to notice that you're having a bunch of emotion. You need to notice that you really feel urgent and you feel reactive. Once you notice this, then you need to pause. You need to literally slow down and turn inward with your attention. And then you have to keep in mind that your new direction is the inward focus, not the outside external world. Of the three of these, the pause is the most critical. But if you don't know you need to pause, you'll forget to do the U-turn in the first place.

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So let's talk about how you can increase your sensitivity to perceiving the need to do a U-turn. Now, there are two main things to do this. Number one, pay attention to your emotions. Number two, pay attention to your body. So for the emotions piece, when you're feeling intense emotion, say on a scale of 1 to 10, you're a 6 or more, that means there's something very meaningful going on for you. When you have an abrupt change in your emotional state, and you go from just cruising along through clinic, through the office, to having a wave of dread or instant anger, that's when you do a U-turn.

Let's say your emotional state is akin to a body of water. And you are a boat on that water. When you feel like there's too much rocking, too many repetitive waves, too strong of a current for you to stay righted, that is a cue. There's something going on worth paying attention to and doing a U-turn for. Whenever you're tense, or you feel out of control, as opposed to feeling calm. Whenever you're overwhelmed instead of clear. Whenever you feel insecure or self-conscious instead of confident. Whenever there's a big emotion going on, that is your cue to pause. That means it's time to do a U-turn. When you have intense focus on other people as the source of your irritation, that's your cue to do a U-turn.

Now secondly, you can increase your sensitivity for the need to do a U-turn by paying attention to what your body feels like. Do your legs want to race up to somebody and tell them something? Do your shoulders feel really tight and up by your ears? Is your belly tense? Does your neck and palate feel clenched? Do you have a blank numbness or a difficulty finding your words that feels like you're frozen? Whenever your body doesn't feel settled and grounded, there's something worth tuning into.

And then the third aspect of a mental emotional U-turn is just like with driving. Once you do the U-turn, it can be very easy to get distracted and re-attend to the outside world and just neglect what's going on inside you. Just know this phenomenon exists and try to gently bring your focus back inside and keep your attention internally. Now, what you find might surprise

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you. What you find will for sure inform you and increase your understanding of yourself.

So let's make this really concrete. Here's what it might look like to do a U-turn. Say you're frustrated with how long it's taking your partner or your kids to get ready to get out the door to go somewhere. Or say you're really irritated or agitated with the OR the office staff for how long they're taking to get your patient back.

A U-turn would look like recognizing that you feel really irritated and frustrated, recognizing that you feel really reactive, and pausing and going, oh, right now I'm super frustrated. Right now, a part of me feels really frustrated. A part of me feels super agitated and angry. What's look inward? What is getting stirred up for me? Oh, I feel really angry right now. I'm super upset. Oh, this is a part of me. And you know what? A part of me also feels really disappointed and sad too. Let me check my body. I'm feeling a mix of red, hot tension and you know there's a bit of heaviness in my shoulders. Huh, I wonder why this is coming up for me right now. That's what it sounds like in your mind to do a U-turn. And that's a long U-turn.

A U-turn can be short and brief. 3 seconds, 2 seconds. Ah, this is what this is bringing up for me right now. Or it can be longer, where you notice and name what's coming up for you, where you do a body scan, where you get really curious about the etiology of what's coming up. And regardless of if you do a short or a long U-turn, to do a U-turn might require that you leave the situation you're in. Or you might simply be able to pause and stop talking, take a couple breaths, and then look inside.

So this week, this week is the week of U-turns. Try them. Notice when you need one. Notice when you feel activated, reactionary, enraged, anxious, any strong emotion. And then pause. Turn your attention inward and be curious. What's going on here? What's getting stirred up for me? What's my body feel like? What's going on in my mind? What's going on in my emotions? How come this is coming up for me? U-turns can be

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instrumental for knowing yourself better, and they benefit interpersonal relationships because they reduce reactivity.

So I hope this concept was useful for you and that you find the most interesting information as you do these U-turns. Until next week, I'll talk to you soon.

So I hope you enjoyed that episode. If you've been feeling more reactionary than you would like, coaching can help. Now, coaching isn't therapy, but coaching helps with self-awareness and practical tools and techniques that increase your sense of purpose, your self-confidence, and your resourcefulness. And if you want to learn more about whether coaching is a good match for you, join my email list.

You join the list by going to habitsonpurpose.com and on the main page, you'll see a little box that says, join the email list.

And then if you want to connect to see if private coaching would be a beautiful fit for what you would like to do, go to habitsonpurpose.com/private and we can see if my coaching is a fit for your goals. Take care and have a beautiful 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.