

Ep #203 : Holiday Stress Relief: Shifting from Obligation to Choice



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With Your Host

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Today, we're talking about holiday stress and specifically, talking about the difference between having to versus choosing to. 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.

Well, hello everyone. So, if you are new to the podcast, I just want to give you a nice warm welcome. Welcome to the Habits On Purpose Podcast. It is wonderful to have you here. And as you will see as we go along, I talk about habits in a bit of a different way than you might ordinarily think about habits. I talk about habits as solutions. And I talk about habits that you might not think about as typical habits.

So, if this is your first episode, I'm so glad you're here, and I will encourage you to go back and listen to earlier episodes because they are chock-full of so much valuable information that will really transform how you think, how you feel, and how you show up in your life.

If you're one of my long-term listeners, you know how much I adore you, and it is so wonderful just imagining that you are taking me with you on your drives, your runs, your walks, and your call shifts. So, thanks for taking me with you today.

So let's talk about the holiday season. We are in the thick of the holiday season here in the United States and the Western hemisphere with Thanksgiving and Hanukkah and Christmas and all the different celebrations that go on between November and December.

For many of you, it's going to be a time that's filled with extra time visiting family, juggling work and your time off of work. There are parties and food and drinks and desserts. There's interacting with relatives that you don't see all the time. Maybe there's remembering there's a reason that you only see these relatives once a year. There could be travel and ornery kids, time in hotel rooms, long drives that you are really wishing were shorter drives.

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There are chances to get irritated and triggered by the very people you love the most. And we could spend a full weekend and just scratch the surface with all the issues that come up during the holiday season. But today we're going to focus on one in particular. Today I'm talking about the habit of saying, "I have to." The habit of thinking in your mind, "I have to." And I'm going to talk about the difference between I have to and I choose to.

Now, before I start, when I say, "I have to," I'm not referring to the matter-of-fact way that we say, "Hey, hold on a minute, I have to answer the door," or, "I have to run and grab some milk from the grocery store," or, "get a sweater," or, "adjust my glasses," or, "I have to set up my keyboard for my piano class."

The "I have to" that I'm talking about is the "I have to" that feels like a chore or an obligation. This kind of "I have to" statement can be something that you say or something that you think, and it comes in a few different forms. Either the simple, "I have to," or, "I should," or, "I can't do the alternative." For example, "I can't say no," i.e., "I have to go see them."

These kinds of "I have to" statements and thoughts are statements of obligation. When you think or say, "I have to" in this way, that means that part of you has forgotten that you have agency.

Now there's a whole spectrum of "I have to" that can come up around the holidays, and it sounds like this. I have to finish these charts before the vacation. I have to get everyone ready to go see so-and-so and then be back on time for the next thing. I have to at least try her homemade pie or I'm going to offend her. I have to get ready for that Secret Santa thing, even though I hate the Secret Santa thing. I have to make sure everybody gets equal time with the grandkids. I can't just say no. We can't just not go see them. I have to have at least one drink or they're going to wonder if I have a problem. I have to listen to Uncle So-and-so lecture me about my career choice yet again.

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You know an "I have to" by how the thought or statement makes you feel. These kinds of "I have to's" feel heavy. They feel like there's a sense of stuckness, and they might invoke annoyance or anger. You know this kind of "I have to" feeling, right?

So feel the difference when I say these different statements. Feel the difference between, "I have to smile and be nice," and, "I'm choosing to smile and be nice." Can you tell the difference?

Here are some more. I have to finish these by such and such date. I'm choosing to do something I don't love. How badass is that? Or, I'm choosing to do my charts right now so that when I come back from break, they're done. I have to work so much harder than others versus, I choose to practice and work harder than the others because that's how I improve my skills. I have to make breakfast, get everybody ready, and get out the door. Versus, today, I'm choosing to make breakfast, get my crew ready, and get out the door. I have to stay in this job. I have to stay in this town. I choose to stay in this job. I'm choosing to stay in this town for now. How about, "I have to go exercise even though I don't want to," or, "I'm choosing to exercise even though I don't want to."

Acknowledging choice is powerful for a few reasons. Number one, when you acknowledge you have a choice, it reminds you that you do have a choice. When you remember that you do have choice, then if you can choose this particular thing, you can also choose something else. Sometimes just knowing that you're not stuck doing one particular thing changes how you feel when you actually do it. Saying "I choose" can be liberating. Saying "I have to" can feel obliged or even perhaps feeling like a bit of a victim to something that you can't control.

The second reason that acknowledging choice is so powerful is it helps you check in to see if you actually want to choose this thing you're saying that you have to do. Maybe you have a relative that gossips or criticizes your kids or bullies your spouse or some other relative. And when you go visit this person, maybe you've always just bit your tongue, walked on

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eggshells, laughed, went along with things even though you're seething on the inside. When you think, "I just have to bite my tongue and not speak up," you might feel obliged. Versus when you think, "I'm choosing to bite my tongue and not speak up," or, "I'm choosing to let them bully so-and-so."

This can be so eye-opening. When you say, "I choose," you may recoil at the idea of what you're choosing. When you say, "I choose," you may realize you have good reasons for choosing to do what you're doing. And this invites you to choose with your eyes wide open. And when you do this, it invites you to possibly choose something else that may be more in alignment with your core values or to, eyes wide open, recognize that in this particular moment, you are choosing something for which you like your reasons.

Now, the third reason that acknowledging choice is so powerful is that when there's choice, there's play and experimentation. Every time you notice yourself thinking that you have to do something and you shift to an "I choose" statement, you get to play around. It sounds like this. In this moment, I usually would choose to do X, but for now, I'm choosing to do Y. Let's see what happens next. Or, I wonder what happens when I choose to do this instead. And this kind of playful experimentation can make navigating holiday get-togethers so much lighter.

So being clear about the things that you, quote, "have to do," and if you're here with me in my home studio, I'm doing air quotes about "have to do," versus the things that you choose to do, applies to every aspect of holiday stress. It applies to food, to drinks, to invitations, to travel, to gift-giving, to interacting with your family, and to setting boundaries. Listen to these "have to" statements converted to "choose" statements and see how they open you up to clarity around reasons for doing things.

I have to clean my plate. I choose to clean my plate. Or maybe I don't want to choose to clean my plate. I have to drink at least one drink; otherwise, it'll be awkward. Versus, I'm choosing to drink one more drink because otherwise, it'll be awkward. Wait a second. Maybe there's another option

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where I can choose to drink for reasons I like or choose not to drink. How about, "I have to go to everyone's events." When you say, "I choose," "I'm choosing to go to everyone's events." Well, that actually sounds pretty fun. Or, "I'm choosing to go to everyone's events." Oh, hell no. I'm not going to do that to myself.

Or how about when it comes to food preparation? I have to cook a big meal from scratch. Change that to "I choose." It sounds like, "I'm choosing to cook a big meal from scratch." Wow, I love doing that. But you know what I need to do to make it easier is I need to enlist help from so-and-so with the laundry. Or when you convert it to, "I'm choosing to cook a big meal from scratch," and you wince when you say that, then you realize you might rather cater the meal or go out to dinner or just keep your food plan simpler.

How about this one? We have to smile and pretend we're having fun. Versus, I'm choosing to pretend I'm having fun because so-and-so is probably not going to live much longer, and this feels like the right thing to do right now. Or, I'm choosing to pretend I'm having fun. Ew, no. I am absolutely done pretending. What I'm going to do instead is...

Now, here's one of the most common ones. What about, "I have to say yes. I have to go. I can't say no." When you convert those, it sounds like this. I'm choosing to say yes. I'm choosing to go. And in fact, I like my reasons. Or, in fact, in this instance, the truth is I don't want to say yes. So I'm not going to continue to choose what feels inauthentic to me.

Now, since I know many of you here have a ruthless inner critic and may have a tendency to use this "I choose to" perspective against yourself without even realizing it, I want to give you a big warning. When we convert something from an "I have to" to an "I choose to," the goal isn't to make yourself or force yourself to like something that you don't like. And it's also not about using an "I choose to" statement to go back and meanly judge yourself for what you might have been choosing in the past.

Say up to this point, you've been doing things and justifying doing them by thinking, "I have to," fill in the blank. When you shift to "I choose to," it might

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be very easy for the highly self-critical, perfectionistic part of you to use that as a whip and to look back and say, "Oh my goodness, I have been choosing this all along. What is my problem?" And from there, it's a very, very slippery slope to go from the agency of "I choose" to scathing judgment. So just watch this and notice if you're doing this because there's absolutely no utility in it.

Let me give you an example to make it really clear. Say you have a relative. I'm thinking of like some fictional aunt. And this aunt of yours tells you that your career choice or your travel for work is just damaging your family unit. Or every time she sees an outfit that your kid chose to wear, she says things like, "No self-respecting parent would let children out in the world with that color combination. Child, what's wrong with you? Why don't you dress like all the other girls or boys?"

Now, in this situation, on this lovely holiday visit that you're on, in the past, you might have thought, "Here I am again, I have to listen to her, and I have to get through the next 2 hours without a family brawl." When you shift to an "I am choosing" statement, it might sound like, "I'm choosing A, not to argue with Auntie for reasons that I like." Or B, "I'm choosing to set a clear boundary like, we disagree on this one, and if you keep saying things like that to the kids, then we're going to leave." But you could easily distort the "I choose" concept to something that sounds like this. Here I am, and I'm choosing to let her walk all over me and be mean to my kids. I've chosen this for years. What kind of person chooses such a thing?

Or here's another common example. Say you went on vacation and you returned a little bit tired, and when you're going back to work, you are facing a stretch of busy days. There's a lot of projects due, you're on call shifts that are busy. In the past, you might say, "Ugh, I have to go to work when I don't want to," and you might feel that really familiar sense of obliged pressure and just stuckness. When you shift to saying something from the "I choose" perspective, it might sound like, "This is hard, but I'm choosing to work this shift." Self-blame, however, would sound more like, "Here I am choosing to exhaust myself. I did this to myself."

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So if you have this tendency to use coaching tools against yourself, just take this as your fair warning, and if you notice it, just stop.

So, in summary, "I have to" thoughts are thoughts that keep us feeling stuck, obliged, and a bit of a victim without any agency. And when we're in that state, we can't even see that we have options. It feels terrible.

And when we're doing this during our holiday season, it can be particularly painful because we might have this idea in our mind of this idyllic, very romanticized, sitting by the fireside, laughing, drama-free, lots of love, lots of connection, candlelight, pretty decorations, people who haven't seen each other with loving, embraced reunions.

And when we have this very romantic image in our minds, and then we have a very stark contrasting reality of feeling obliged and stuck and like we have a list a mile long of "have to's," our holiday season can be really torturous. "I have to's" make it such that we cannot see there is room to question the very things that we feel like we must do, and consider what we actually really want to do and what we prefer to do.

So my question to you is, where can you start shifting from "I have to" to "I choose to"? And when you do, I invite you to check in, check in with how it feels, check in with your body. Does acknowledging that you're choosing to do something feel good? Do you have great reasons for choosing this particular thing at this particular moment? Or when you recognize the choice, do you now want to choose something else?

Shifting to "I choose" statements is the greatest way to cultivate agency. And when you do this, you will surf your holiday season with so much less angst, resent, and irritability. And what better gift to give to yourself over the holiday season than a sense of internally cultivated agency? Until next week, I'll see you soon.

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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.