

Ep #204 : The Best of Habits On Purpose: Insights and Tools from the Year



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With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Welcome to this special holiday episode of the show. As we head into wrapping up the year and settle into the rhythm of the season, I wanted to give you just a little something different. So today's episode is a best-of collection, and it features some of the most powerful moments, insights, and conversations from past episodes. Think of it as a beautifully wrapped bundle of the reminders and tools that have really helped so many of you throughout the year.

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.

Slowing down could be luxuriously pleasant and pleasurable. It could also reveal how exhausted you are, or it could be extremely uncomfortable because uncomfortable emotions present. Or, if you've got a thousand things on your to-do list and there's not enough time to get to those things, the weight of slowing down might feel unbearable in that moment. Now, I'm not really selling this to you, am I? So, let me tell you, why on earth should you slow down on purpose?

Slowing down, be it pleasant or not, is a way to recalibrate. So if your life feels frantic, if, if you like heart analogies, if it's like atrial fibrillation, slowing down is an effective diastole and systole. Slowing down is like a reset and a check-in. It helps you see what's going on inside you that's easy to overlook in the ordinary pace of life.

It's like a timeout in a sports game. You can take a breather, you can step back, get a little perspective, you can adjust your game plan based on what you've just experienced. You can check in to see if any of the new information that you've gotten recently changes what you need to do next. You can check in to see if there's anything that you need in that moment.

Taking one minute to slow down and do almost nothing can lower your cortisol, and it can reduce feeling reactive. It can also restore your default mode network into action. Your default mode network is involved with

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memory consolidation, planning for the future, as well as creativity. It's also suggested that when you slow down for even just 60 seconds, your dopamine levels can balance out. Neuroplasticity is enhanced and your heart rate variability is improved. And all of this can combine to be very grounding and help with emotional regulation, your ability to feel your emotions without being flooded by them.

Now, slowing down, or taking a moment to do something that requires intense focus done very slowly, or doing absolutely nothing, all of these different things, they can sound very different. But in reality, they activate a similarly beneficial experience internally. And this can be the one tiny intervention that you can pretty easily operationalize in your life. And it can also be something that you add to a larger project that you've got going on, or you can add to introspective work as an adjunct to any other thing that you're doing to better understand yourself or change a habit.

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Say you are hiking and you're on a trail and you're on your own particular mountain. And the trail you're on, it goes in and out of tree cover. Sometimes you can tell where you are relative to the top. Other times, maybe not so much. Perhaps you have a map that shows you some of the things, but maybe the topo lines aren't really lining up and things are sometimes unexpectedly a little bit different, or maybe there's a detour. Other times, you know exactly where you're going. The view, the scenery, you can see lakes, rivers, you can see another mountain out there.

And from your vantage point, when you look at the other mountain that you see in the distance, you can see a meandering footpath that goes up the mountain. You can see the bottom, you can see the top. You can see a lot of the obstacles. You can maybe see some clouds that are, you know, predicting some really rainy, stormy weather that are coming in from the south. And maybe you can see mountain goats or birds. And maybe you even have some binoculars that will show you even more detail.

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And by the simple fact that you are further away, if there were another person on that other mountain, you can see more of the other person's mountain, more of that mountain than you can see of your own. And the same is true for someone else who is on the mountain you're looking at. If they were to look up and look out, they could see, observe, and examine your mountain with the perspective that they don't have of their own.

So, to take this idea of these two mountains and discuss how it can be a metaphor in life and a metaphor for thinking about thinking and feelings and our experiences, we have two people on separate mountains. Both people have challenges in front of them. Neither one knows exactly what the other one is facing. Neither one knows exactly what it's like for the other person to go up their particular mountain. Neither of them knows like what it's like when the other person sort of turns in on a trail that they can't see and knows what's actually there.

But both people can kind of imagine what it's like for the other person. And since they have a different vantage point and they can see things, if they could speak to one another, they could perhaps offer perspective and direction, maybe guidance from what they can't see. Now, this can represent two people in relationship, whether they're partners, parent and child, client and coach, client and therapist, where each person is on their own journey. And neither can know what the other person needs specifically or what the other person should do or will face.

Both of them have struggles, i.e., neither person is superior or more enlightened than the other. And if you're thinking about a therapist and a client, the therapist or the coach, they're not at the top of the mountain with some supreme knowledge that they can dole out to the other people. And both people, they're able to see the other with a vantage point that's just unavailable to whoever's on the mountain. Simply by virtue of the distance and the space.

And this analogy is a way to convey that we're kind of all in it together. There's not a hierarchy where somebody has more authority or is immune

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to struggles. And this also emphasizes the idea that if one person is climbing their mountain, although they can't see the big picture of their mountain, they can see aspects of their particular trail that the other person on the other mountain can't see. It's almost like when you're hiking your trail, you have a backstage pass to the inside things. Like when you're on the trail that goes deep into a forest, only you can see what's there. Only you know. The person who's observing your mountain, well, they can't see that. So, when you are there, you are actually the only person that knows your journey best, the inside of your journey, not somebody outside of you.

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I taught, to change a habit, you must change what you're habitually telling yourself. Thoughts create feelings, feelings drive actions, actions create our lived experience, and therefore, what we think creates our experience. I taught that we can literally think any thought that we want, and no one can stop you from thinking anything you want in your mind. And I taught that your habits don't reveal who you are so much as what you are thinking. And from that, I went on to teach people that if you wanted to feel differently, you just needed to practice noticing your default thoughts, picking a more neutral or positive thought, and rehearsing it until it felt natural.

And to be honest, to be fair, this approach can be extremely helpful in certain circumstances up to a point. But it also has some limitations and some potential harms when it's used as a global blunt instrument.

So let's talk about the limitations of this original approach I had. When you hold the thought, feeling, action idea, or the paradigm of cognitive behavioral therapy as sort of the end-all be-all, the ultimate solution, here are some problems that it can lead to. Clients can make themselves wrong for having thoughts that they shouldn't have. Coaches and therapists can inadvertently gaslight clients by suggesting that they're suffering is just because they're choosing bad thoughts.

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People can bypass trauma or deeper emotional wounds because they're just told they should just think differently. People can ignore real structural and systemic, cultural obstacles, biases, systems of oppression by believing that everything they experience comes down solely to the thoughts in their head. And then you can have people thinking that if they can't believe a new thought yet, they must just not be trying hard enough. And this can breed shame. Or people are thinking, I know what I should do. All I need is a better thought. What is wrong with me that I can't get this?

So what I've learned is that you can honor the usefulness of this cognitive approach and still acknowledge that there are some limitations, especially when it's used to sort of bulldoze over some deeper truths.

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Today, I still believe that thinking new thoughts are useful, but that's definitely not the whole story. So if I were to rewrite those earlier ideas, this is how I would put it. So the old idea was, to change a habit, you must change what you're habitually telling yourself. The new idea is, to change a habit and what you're habitually telling yourself, you must understand why you're telling yourself that stuff in the first place. Which part of you are these thoughts coming from? And how do these thoughts make sense?

So the old way was, thoughts create feelings, feelings drive actions, and actions create everything about our lived experience. The new take is, our thoughts indeed can influence and strongly shape our feelings, our actions, and our whole experience. But so do the parts of you that are behind those thoughts. So does your nervous system. So do your protective and adaptive strategies, and all the cultural systems you live in have a downstream impact.

The old take, we can literally think any thought we want, and no one can stop us from thinking something in our mind. The current take is, yes, you can absolutely think anything you would like. And if you can't think the right thought yet, the thought that helps you feel better, that doesn't mean that you're failing. It often means there's something deeper there calling for your

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attention. The old approach, habits do not reveal who we are so much as what we are thinking. My new take, habits don't reveal who we are so much as which parts of us, which protective, adaptive strategies are most prominent at the time.

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Have you ever been midway through your day and you suddenly realize that you are rushing, you are irritable, you haven't eaten, or maybe you have eaten all the things, you're curt with everyone, but you have no clue how to get settled? And then maybe you feel guilty, but because you don't know what to do to change things, you just plow ahead like it's the only option. So even though you know you have a chip on your shoulder, finding calm feels impossible in these moments.

Or maybe you catch yourself scrolling instead of doing the thing that you really care about, or arguing when you meant to be connecting. And intellectually, you might see all the things going sideways and know that you need a reset, but it's just out of reach. Like, you don't actually know how to pivot in the moment in a way that's really meaningful. So if you can relate, this is not because you're bad at adulting. It's just because your nervous system is doing the job it's designed to do.

It's trying to protect you by keeping you in motion, keeping you braced or numbed out or whatever it's learned works best when you're overwhelmed. And the truth is, sometimes these strategies actually do help until they don't.

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So what helps pivot when it's difficult? First off, just know it is possible to change lanes mid-ride, and even a tiny, tiny pivot makes a profound difference. The approach I love, I just call the one-degree shift. So here are the three steps for a one-degree shift.

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First, pause and name what's happening. This sounds like, this is stress taking over. This is stress talking. Something feels off. This isn't how I want to be right now. That's it. Labeling what's happening works because number one, it imposes a pause, and number two, it helps you become a witness of yourself. Pausing and naming is the equivalent of moving your hand away from your face so that it is arm's length away and you can see it better.

So, after you pause and name what's going on, you validate with compassion. This sounds like, no wonder this is happening. Of course, I'm feeling this way. It's been a long day. This feels stressful because it is stressful. When you internally validate what's going on for you, you dial up objectivity. You give yourself perspective. You remind yourself that your experience is reasonable, that it makes sense. And this slows that psychological momentum of the default spiraling.

Now the third step of the one-degree shift is to get business-like with a micro pivot. Start doing this by reorienting yourself and getting really concrete. And there are a variety of things you can do to bring your executive function back online, and here are some ideas. First, you can just check what time is it? What's going on around me? Where am I located? And what is one small thing I could do in this moment right now?

You can externalize what's hard. Write it down, text a friend, say out loud what you notice. This gives you some space from what is inside. You can move, stand up, change rooms, stretch, get a sip of water, look out the window, close your eyes for 30 seconds, do four box breaths, do ten squats, walk around the block, move your body in some way. Or you can get inquisitive. Ask, what do I need? What can I do to help make this 10% easier? What needs some attention, even if it's later on?

So the steps of a one-degree shift are, pause and name what's happening, validate with compassion, and then get business-like with some sort of concrete micro pivot. And here's the thing, even when everything feels off, you don't have to overhaul everything. You just need a one-degree shift.

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So what increases the chances of living a life on autopilot and living a life for other expectations and not being true to you? Well, number one, no one teaches us this. So, a certain degree of ignorance keeps us unaware that this phenomenon can even happen. Number two, autopilot life comes from autopilot habits. Autopilot habits are repeated patterns of thinking, repeated patterns of feeling and acting that simply aren't examined and are the things that we do on default. They are default instead of purposeful.

And autopilot life is how you can be living every day without really noticing that you're not living in a way that you want. Metaphorically, you're taking the super highway instead of the goat path, simply because it's well-established, familiar, and it's easier.

Now, when I say easier, I don't necessarily mean more in alignment or more pleasant. What I mean by easier is when you have done something thousands upon thousands of times, there is a natural tendency for repetition. So, how do you make more of your habits purposeful? Well, that's what we're going to talk about today, and it's probably not what you think.

When it comes to changing habits, not living a life on default, and being more authentically you, the most powerful idea I have found that can help you reduce the chance of living that autopilot life and having that regret is to remember that everything you do, even the things that you wish you could change, every single thing that you do, you do for a good reason. And when you can trace back what you're doing to the root causes, everything makes sense.

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What do I crave? What actually matters that I'm not getting enough of? And you're asking these questions in the context of the specific problem you're grappling with. Then you ask yourself, what might it look like if you had the very thing you crave, if you did the activities you wanted and felt the

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feelings you wanted? And when you do this, you do not consider the details of the logistics or the how. You are just putting to words what you crave, what actually matters that you're not getting enough of, and what it might look like if you had the things you crave, if you were doing more of what you aren't getting enough of, and if you felt the feelings you wanted.

Now, quick side note here, this technique is not about scrubbing clean your human experience or creating some escapist Shangri-La. This is simply an exercise where you give yourself permission to ask what you really want, and then make yourself spend a little time with that instead of scurrying off and ignoring some of these deep desires that are connected to your core values.

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Values blindness is when you lose sight of what truly matters most, and you start making choices that are out of alignment with your deeper values. And similar to time blindness, you don't notice that you're doing it. In everyday life, this can sound like saying yes to every request and then realizing later that you've said no to yourself. It can look like numbing out or staying constantly busy instead of doing what's truly meaningful. It can be feeling strangely hollow or just restless, even when everything looks good on paper. It's that subtle drift away from what truly matters.

So why does it happen? It can happen for a few reasons. You're not totally clear on what your current values are, what truly matters to you now, maybe not what mattered five years ago, and what truly matters to you as opposed to maybe what mattered to your family, your friends, your boss.

You haven't identified where or why it's hard to live in alignment with your values. Life moves so fast that reflection falls to the bottom of the list. And if you've spent years over-performing for approval or belonging or a promotion, it can be really easy to forget about you and just to lose sight of your actual priorities.

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When you're constantly in go mode, the brain's reflexive systems, the parts that help you connect to meaning and purpose, they actually quiet down. They kind of fade into the background. And you become really efficient, but not necessarily aligned. So here's the fascinating thing, you can use the same executive function tools that help in ADHD with time blindness to address values blindness.

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Motivation is unreliable. So one of the biggest myths surrounding habit change and accomplishing goals is that you have to feel motivated to take action. And this idea can come out sort of implicitly in a lot of the recommendations and a lot of the really good and sometimes maybe not so good advice that surrounds habit change.

So sometimes we will find it's really powerful to suggest that you come up with a compelling reason why, so that you can be really committed, so that you can take action when things get difficult. And that's fantastic.

But sometimes that idea can be distorted and you can think that, well, if I come up with the like the right reason why, the most strongest, most compelling reason why, it will generate the feeling of motivation. And then I will know I found the right reason to do what I want to do. And until I find that correct reason that invokes a feeling of motivation, probably I just haven't found the most compelling reason why. And therefore, I'm going to go keep looking for it. You know where that goes, right? That has us all in our head, analyzing, thinking, figuring, planning, speculating, and not doing anything.

So there's nothing wrong with coming up with a compelling reason why. I recommend it. It's great. But if you use that as a way to try to wait for motivation to help you get going, you're going to be waiting a long ass time.

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.