

## Ep #206 : How Giving the Benefit of the Doubt Improves Your Life



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With Your Host

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Hi there. In today's episode, we're going to talk about the ten things that happen when you give the benefit of the doubt.

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. I'm really excited about this episode. Today I'm talking about giving the benefit of the doubt and making giving the benefit of the doubt into a habit.

Now, I used to think that I always gave people the benefit of the doubt. My sort of natural default before I discovered thought work and coaching and these types of things was to be extremely optimistic, always see the good in people. And so I kind of just assumed that I gave everybody the benefit of the doubt.

But I have learned that so very often, unbeknownst to me until recently, my automatic response is not to actually give the benefit of the doubt. So in this episode, I'm going to define giving the benefit of the doubt, talk about the benefits of it, and then encourage you to practice building this as a habit for yourself.

All right, so let me set the stage for you. Say you have a phone date planned or a coffee date with a friend. And when the time comes, they don't show. There's no courtesy cancellation message, there's no apology later, there's nothing. What is your first response?

Maybe you get really irritated. I mean, come on, my time is precious. What the hell? Or perhaps you assume this just means that they don't like you. Because if they did, they wouldn't stand you up. Or they would at least send you a message. Or you might reflexively give them the benefit of the doubt and assume something must have come up. They lost their phone, they ran into traffic, they maybe didn't want to meet or couldn't meet, but

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they forgot to cancel. Or they just got super busy, and they just genuinely forgot.

So in this episode, I want to get deep into benefit of the doubt and the ten benefits that you get when you give the benefit of the doubt more regularly. And then I'm going to invite you to practice building this as a habit and not just giving other people the benefit of the doubt, but giving it to yourself.

So first of all, let's define it. To give the benefit of the doubt is to assume the most positive interpretation, to assume the best, even if there are doubts. The Cambridge Dictionary says it really nicely. It says, "to give the benefit of the doubt is to believe something good about someone rather than believing something bad when you have the choice to do either." Now, benefit of the doubt can apply to people as well as to situations.

In psychology, to give the benefit of the doubt reflects a kind of attributional style. Attributional style is the way that you explain the cause of events in your life, how you explain the things that happen. Attributional styles can span a whole spectrum from being really gracious and really positive to being more benign and neutral to being very pessimistic and assuming the worst and assuming even a hostile intent from other people.

So let me give you an example. Say you're a teacher and your students do not remember anything that you've told them, even though you've told them this thing many, many times. A negative external attributional style would be to assume that the students are disrespectful, they're lazy, they're not listening. A negative internal attribution would be to conclude that you're not a good teacher, you always mess things up, and not only do you do this at your job, but you do this in every aspect of your life.

A neutral or positive attribution would sound like this: You know, I bet they've got a lot going on. This isn't the only class these kids are in, and maybe I've gone over these things really fast, and maybe it just didn't have a chance to stick. Perhaps they're tired, perhaps they're having an off day. You know, I get that. Perhaps I was having an off day when I talked about it.

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To give the benefit of the doubt is a neutral, positive, or optimistic attributional style that has several benefits. When you deliberately give people the benefit of the doubt, you cultivate a habit with a positive attribution style, something that's actually correlated with more happiness and elevated well-being.

Now, before I discuss the benefits, let's address the main objection to giving the benefit of the doubt. The main objection sounds like this: Isn't it just naive? Isn't giving the benefit of the doubt just a recipe for being walked all over, for being treated like a doormat, for getting taken advantage of, for ignoring and putting blinders on to red flags? Isn't this a slippery slope to deception or to perhaps even being in unsafe situations?

Now, let's be clear, in certain situations, giving the benefit of the doubt is risky and entirely not advisable. Imagine repetitively giving a cruel, sociopathic boss the benefit of the doubt, leading to you having a miserable existence where you never stand up for yourself, you justify the mistreatment, and you end up tolerating something you'd be better off leaving. Benefit of the doubt to somebody who repeatedly mistreats you, to a narcissistic person who treats you poorly, Not a good idea. Overriding your intuition when it tells you, this is dangerous, this is toxic, I need to go, that can be really problematic. Global benefit of the doubt in certain cities across the world will get your bike or your car stolen.

Per PhD, Dr. Dervasula, quote, "Scammers, predators, narcissists, they all play on people's empathy. Your empathy becomes for them a sort of weakness that they can exploit, that they can take advantage of. I always tell people, catch your justifications, and that the four most dangerous words in the English language are benefit of the doubt," end quote. So, knowing when not to give the benefit of the doubt is really important. But in situations that are outside toxic work environments, outside opportunistic crime, there is robust benefit to giving the benefit of the doubt.

So when I started practicing assuming the best, assuming positive intent, and giving the benefit of the doubt, I noticed a massive shift in my

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day-to-day experience. Here are the ten things that happened when I started doing this.

Number one, I took things less personally. Number two, I had less interpersonal conflict. Number three, my inner critic was so much quieter. Number four, I started being able to prioritize what mattered and let go of the little stuff. Number five, it increased curiosity. Number six, I had less stewing, ruminating, and complaining. Number seven, it increased my ease with setting boundaries and increased assertiveness. Number eight, it brought an increased sense of belonging. Number nine, I had better access to intuition, and I made quicker decisions. And number ten, I got overall better with communication. So let me go over each of these.

So number one, I took things less personally. At first, this took a lot of work because taking things personally is one of my specialties. Taking benign comments or neutral actions or words from other people and creatively finding a way to twist them into something terribly scathing about me is something I was really good at. When I started deliberately assuming the best about other people and assuming positive intent, it helped me take things at face value.

So, I think I've given this example before, but when my husband said that coriander and cilantro would go really well with the meal that I made, when I gave the benefit of the doubt, I didn't instantly think that he was criticizing my cooking skills. Benefit of the doubt helped me trust that whatever somebody did or said or felt was mostly about them and not so much about me. It helped me cultivate a sense of trust that if there was something going on that involved me, that they would just let me know.

Taking things less personally allowed me to really listen to legitimate criticism without getting so defensive. So when I had a loved one who was irritated or angry with me, instead of feeling attacked or mirroring their anger back to them, I was quicker to reply with warmth and receptiveness to validate their experience and to offer like a genuine apology if that was what was needed, all because I was giving them the benefit of the doubt.

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Now, this leads me to number two. Benefit of the doubt helped reduce conflict with my loved ones. How? Well, I stopped jumping to negative conclusions and acting on them. Before benefit of the doubt, when I would tell my husband something and then five minutes later, he would ask me a question about the very thing I just told him, I would instantly get irritated. A part of me would feel hurt and unheard and convinced that he didn't appreciate me enough to listen. And another part would get livid and irritated at him for this.

After I shifted this and started defaulting to the benefit of the doubt, when something like this would happen, I would quickly remember that my husband is a kind, caring, detail-oriented person. And if he asked me a question about something I just told him, it was simply because he didn't hear me. He was engrossed in something else. So from this type of energy, I could calmly answer his question and just move on.

Similarly, when my kid forgets his jacket, instead of concluding that he is never going to learn that he lives in Oregon and not Florida, and that he does need a jacket when he goes to his sports practice, and therefore he's absent-minded and he's doomed, when I give him the benefit of the doubt, I can remember that I forget things all the time. And his young brain is learning and absorbing and doing so much development all day, every day. And sometimes it takes learning some life lessons to internalize remembering something. Sometimes there's a lot of repetition that's needed.

And when I approach him with this attitude, I'm so much more loving and more relaxed. And I don't do any micro-shaming or little criticisms or digs, and I don't build a wedge between us. And whether or not he remembers his jacket in the future, my experience of his forgetfulness is so much less angst-ridden.

Now, number three, my inner critic got quieter. Benefit of the doubt to others makes me give it to myself. When I would show up in a way that I didn't like, instead of instantly feeling defeated and defective, I would give

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myself the benefit of the doubt, and this opened the door to self-compassion. I would see myself in such a kinder light.

So, instead of this immense wave of guilt or shame for a mistake or a fail, I would remember that nobody's perfect. And I would open up to learning what I could, and then I would spend so much less time berating myself and wanting to hide from people because I felt like an imbecile.

Number four, I was better able to prioritize what actually mattered. I was able to let little things go instead of taking tiny things and making them into big deals

So, say somebody had a grouchy tone, giving them the benefit of the doubt means that they're not an asshole, they don't hate me. It's just that they're tired, or they had something else they were putting their energy towards besides being cheerful and being in a good mood. If somebody misinterpreted me, instead of feeling really defensive, it's just simply no big deal. Misinterpretations happen. The important thing is we addressed it.

No more perseverating on tiny stressors or tense interactions with my kids. I'd quickly place them in a context. Oh, all of us are being really pissy right now because we're thin-skinned, we are tired, we've been go, go, go lately. No wonder we're being snippy and impatient with one another. The important thing is we're safe, we love each other, and we're going to get some sleep soon. The rest of this can slide. It requires no long-term rental space in my psyche.

Number five, giving the benefit of the doubt increased my curiosity tenfold. I would become genuinely interested in what could be going on behind the scenes to explain something that somebody did. I would wonder, I would consider how it perhaps made sense. I would ask truly curious, open questions. It made my sarcasm slip away. And I would ask things like, what could be going on for this person that explains the thing they did? How could it make sense? What might be going on for them in their life outside

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of work that makes them act like this? And that curiosity was also so helpful when I would direct it towards myself.

Number six, I stopped stewing and complaining so much. The more I gave the benefit of the doubt, the more I automatically appreciated the ways most everyone, most of the time, are doing the best they can do with what they have. And this alone created such a relaxing experience. When I would see a behavior that I find really infuriating, it was so much easier to accept it for what it was and just deal with it, even if it was a situation or behavior that was totally in opposition to the way I run my life or to my values.

So instead of internally fuming and ruminating, I'd be able to find neutrality and sometimes even peace in a situation that was terrible. It would sound something like, you know what, this really sucks, and things need to change to prevent more of this in the future. But for now, this is how it is. Or everybody is probably doing their very best, even if it's not what I would do.

And when I would think about it like this, I would stop letting my time and energy just hemorrhage into griping, bitching, and wishing things were different than they were, which ultimately helped me channel my efforts where they really mattered. So in a situation where an action was needed in order to make a change, set a boundary, change something in terms of a protocol or how things went at work. Not stewing helped me have more energy to ultimately direct it in a productive way towards what I needed to do.

Which leads me to number seven. Ease with articulating boundaries and increased assertiveness. Before giving the benefit of the doubt, when something frustrating would come up, and I would assume the worst, like, this person is so mean, they're entitled, they don't care, they're out to get me, I would feel really bothered. I would feel possibly helpless or attacked. I would blame them, judge them, want nothing to do with them. I'd essentially villainize them and place myself in the victim role, but blame them for doing that to me. And when I felt like this, I would be really aloof, I would

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withdraw, I might be sarcastic, or I might be snippy or really gruff. And in this state, I was not comfortable articulating a boundary.

In contrast, by assuming that people mean well, I was less bothered when things didn't go as I would like. I would think, huh, there must be a good reason for this, even if I can't see it at the time. So maybe I should investigate. Hey, so and so, can you help me understand why this happened this way? Then I would listen, discuss, et cetera.

And then if a boundary was needed, I might say something like, okay, so if in the future, X, Y, Z happens, this is what I'm going to do, because it's important for me to make sure that whatever value we're talking about is upheld here. And I would articulate the boundary in a very businesslike, matter-of-fact way that's infused with so much less drama. And the really cool thing about this is ease with boundaries and ease with being assertive had the byproduct of increased self-esteem and so much more self-confidence.

Now, number eight is a really interesting one. I experienced an increased sense of belonging. Now, this one was so good, and I really didn't expect it. But practicing the habit of giving the benefit of the doubt enhanced a sense of belonging.

This is how it worked. I would assume the best, and when I did that, I would perceive less judgment in subtle or benign things. This meant in social situations, I would assume that a quiet person wasn't a snob, didn't think I was dumb, but maybe they're just shy, or maybe they're just introverted, or maybe they're having a hard day, which meant that their quietness around me wasn't because there was something wrong with me, wasn't because I sucked or they didn't like me.

Benefit of the doubt helped me assume that people are fairly friendly, and I can assume that they're friendly until I learn otherwise. And this made it so much easier to initiate conversations with people that I don't know. As many of you who do know me know that I am very introverted. When it comes to

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socializing, my area where I thrive is in smaller groups with people I know well.

So put me at a meet and greet or a cocktail party or a conference or an event where there's not a lot of people that I know, and a lot of my social anxiety will be really right on the surface. And from that place, it's very easy to feel like I don't belong. But when I assume people are friendly until I learn otherwise, I can reach out and start talking. And when I give myself more kindness with benefit of the doubt, I'm just more at ease being myself in social situations, which usually has a self-fulfilling prophecy effect where it helps me believe that I belong, and then I act accordingly.

Now, number nine, improved intuition and faster decision-making. By assuming people mean well and were doing the best they could, that their actions made sense even if I didn't like them, I would show up with more acceptance, and I would show up more calm.

And what I found is that when I am more calm and accepting, I'm also more objective and neutral. And when I'm more objective and neutral, it's so much easier to have clarity. And when I have more clarity, I have access to my instincts and to my intuition.

So, from this place of assuming positive intention, assuming the best, I was actually counterintuitively so much better able to pick up on times where benefit of the doubt made zero sense. When I assumed the best in people, I would feel more calm. When I feel more calm, I'd be more objective. When I was more objective, I had more clarity. When I had more clarity, I had access to my intuition, which helped me understand the times when I shouldn't give benefit of the doubt.

Now, the final benefit of benefit of the doubt is that it leads to better communication. So when I am frustrated, blinded with annoyance, feeling like a victim, feeling picked on and indignant, when I'm feeling hurt and rejected, my communication reflects this heightened stress. I dig my heels in, I defend my point of view, I'm impatient with others, I blame, I criticize. I

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say things like, if only you had done X, Y, and Z, we wouldn't be in the situation.

But when I'm calmer and I'm open and I'm curious and I'm compassionate, and I assume there's positive intent, I can listen to whoever I'm talking to with so much more of an open mind and an open heart. And I can share what's going on for me without so much defensiveness, without blame. And this leads to conversations that are so much more productive.

So, there you have it, the ten things that you can expect when you give the benefit of the doubt. Number one, taking things less personally. Number two, less interpersonal conflict. Number three, a quieter inner critic. Number four, the ability to prioritize what matters and let go of the little stuff. Number five, increased curiosity. Number six, less stewing, ruminating, and complaining. Number seven, increased ease with setting boundaries. Number eight, an increased sense of belonging. Number nine, access to your intuition and the ability to make quicker decisions. And number ten, overall better communication.

And I find as I reflect on all of these things, all of this helps me be connected to other people and connected to myself in a way that feels really sturdy. So I'm really excited for you to try this. It can be a pivotal change in your energy, your mindset, and your experience of your everyday life. So until next week, enjoy.

Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit [HabitsOnPurpose.com](https://HabitsOnPurpose.com). Tune in next week for another episode.