

Ep #207 : How to Know the Difference Between a Yes and a No



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With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Today's episode is about how to tell the difference between a yes and a no, between things in keeping with your essential values and core desires and things that are not. Let's get started.

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.

So if you are new to the podcast, thank you for tuning in. There are several foundational episodes that I always recommend to new listeners, and they're basically the first 10 episodes. And that gives you a good sense of the podcast. On this podcast, I see it as my mission to help you better understand the core reasons underneath why you think and feel and act as you do. So much of our autopilot thinking and our automatic behaviors are related to socialization that we've subconsciously marinated in and absorbed. And one of the ways to better understand ourselves is to examine our habits. Our habits are reflective of our socialized ideology.

Now, on the podcast, you're going to hear me say over and over and over that habits are not just the repetitive behaviors that we have. They're not just the morning routine. They're not just the way we press snooze or the way we put our hair behind our ear when we're nervous. Our habits are also the patterns of our emotional responses. They're also the repetitive ways we think about ourselves and the way we think about the world.

And the great thing about habits is that although they may seem deeply ingrained, they are actually much more malleable than we realize. And what I've learned from my study of habits is that we can always unlearn old habits and learn new ones. And that to do so, it is an inside job that starts with investigating the ways we think and investigating the beliefs that we've internalized and the rules that we've frankly taken on as truths.

So today I'm going to delve into the difference between a yes and a no, or more specifically, remembering how to discern the difference between a yes and a no. Now, you may have heard the idea that if something isn't a

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hell yes, that means it's a no, or if on a scale of one to 10, if something is not an eight or above in terms of how good it is, that means it's completely a no.

Now, these ideas can be really powerful, and yet, something that I've personally done a lot of work on and that I see so many of my clients grapple with over and over and over again is discerning between things that are a true yes and things that are a true no. It is not always easy to tell the difference between things that they truly desire, that serve them, and things that they really don't want, that don't serve them, and that aren't actually in alignment with their values and priorities.

Now, it seems like the difference between a yes and a no would be obvious, right? But the reality is that it can be quite the riddle. So why is telling the difference between a yes and a no tricky and complex? In this episode, I'll explain exactly how something seemingly so simple is actually complicated. I'll cover why we struggle to tell a yes from a no, and I'll discuss why it can be hard to pursue a yes and stop pursuing a no once you can tell the difference. Then I'm going to give you some practical ways to get more clarity around what for you is a hell yes and what for you is a big old no.

Now, first of all, it's my belief that we are born knowing what a yes is and knowing what a no is. Think of babies and think of toddlers. For the most part, at that age, we have no reservations about expressing what we sense is a no and what we sense is a yes. And we often do this in very loud ways, in no uncertain terms. Giggles and glee signals a yes to the oatmeal. A scrunched-up, angry red face means a no to the banana. Yes to the story being read, no to the story ending.

But as we grow up, these clear yeses and clear nos, they aren't so clear. So why might this be the case? Well, we have experiences in our formative years where everything felt amazingly great. Everything felt like a yes, but then, unpredictably, things went sideways. We were enjoying friends, and then we were made fun of. We showed a parent something that delighted

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us, and we got a flat, disinterested reply, or worse, a snarky insult. We found a subject in school that we loved all to find it not valued by peers. We go to try out for the school play, and somebody whispers to us, "Only rejects do theater." Or maybe we trusted someone and found out later that we shouldn't have, or we found out the hard way that we shouldn't have trusted them.

When these are experiences, over time, we learn that our initial yeses can't be trusted. They were risky. They were unsafe. They were problematic when we trusted them. So over time, for many of us, our yeses and our nos got all muddled up. Perhaps we were chided into doing something when our intuition told us something was really, really wrong, and we overrode that in an attempt to fit in or get the respect of peers or avoid exclusion.

We then learn to override what we know to our core to be correct. And then this habit extends beyond the playground and beyond middle school cliques. This obscuring of what for us is clarity about what is good and what is valued and what is not follows us to college. We see this when, say, there's an anthropology class or a history class that we loved, and we abandon it when our partner rolls their eyes and says, you're not going to cop out and do that as your major, are you? Or your parent asks you, how's your law school application going? Even though they know that you want to do research in a microbiology lab and have zero interest in following in the family footsteps to being an attorney.

When what your inner compass tells you is not accepted, much less encouraged by peers, parents, society, you may learn to tamp down what you deeply want, what you like, what you're drawn toward, and march forward towards goals that maybe aren't even yours. Conversely, you may make it a habit to ignore or discredit alarm bells or even just your personal disinterest to make room for doing what you think other people would prefer that you do.

When this happens as we age, we learn to distrust our own visceral and intuitive yeses and nos that once came so easily when we were children.

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Some of us develop a vigilant and wary eye, a skepticism, a desire to please, and need to conform to perhaps avoid ridicule. And all of this adds up to become a baseline lack of self-trust and a habit of an outward gaze to assess if what we think and feel and do and want to pursue, if these things are good or not, acceptable or not. And once we assess this, then we adjust our thoughts and feelings and behaviors accordingly. And maybe decades later we wonder why we don't feel so great about life. We wonder, who am I? What do I even like? Have I ever even known? Where am I going?

And this is how yeses and nos become so complicated. So my question for you is, are there things that you used to love doing that you've turned your back on for some reason or other? Can you recall overriding objections and overriding your instincts telling you that something was off? Or maybe as you're listening to this, do you realize that right now perhaps your life is filled with a few things or maybe even many things that if you're really honest, you don't like and that you don't want to keep doing? You are not alone if this is familiar.

So if this is you, you can probably think of how it shows up for you. And for those of you who are on the fence about whether or not you have a difficulty with yeses and nos, I'm going to share with you how this phenomenon shows up.

So here are some signs that you might have your yeses and your nos all jumbled up. Your yeses and nos might be confused if you find yourself overthinking, having confusion about what you want in life, struggling to make decisions, and engaging in analysis paralysis. You might have your yeses and nos confused if you struggle with self-doubt, and if you do a lot of crowd sourcing and looking to others as having the answer.

This might be you if a lot of the things you do day-to-day feel like they are done from obligation, because perhaps you pick them not because they were a yes, but because they were socially acceptable choices to others. It might also show up when you notice that you wouldn't miss doing

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something that you are doing on a daily basis. And in fact, you kind of want to do something really different, but because it's a departure from your current job description or the norm in your family or the norm at your company or institution, you interpret this desire for change as a sign that maybe you're not dedicated or you're not cut out for the job. You might even muse, maybe I'm a bad blank, a bad worker, a bad parent, a bad doctor, a bad whatever, because what you really, really want isn't the norm.

Your yeses and nos might be all mixed up if you have been following in your family's career footsteps and never stopped to question if it's truly what you wanted. Or if you picked a goal, put your head down and worked like a maniac to make it happen, and didn't stop along the way to assess and evaluate. Does this still make sense?

Or perhaps your entire work culture seems to enjoy something that you don't, or you enjoy something that your work culture doesn't, and then you question yourself, am I just confused? Maybe I'm burned out. Did I pick the wrong profession? Or maybe the way it shows up for you is perpetually agreeing to things, saying yes, accommodating for small nuisances and big boundary violations, overextending at your own expense, saying yes when what you really want is to say no.

So on the surface, it seems like it'd be really easy to just flip a switch and start telling the difference routinely between what's a yes for you and what's a no. But in reality, it's not so simplistic as a switch. So why not? Why isn't it easier?

Well, first of all, when we have confused yeses with nos and gotten them backwards for a long time, it's often very hard to detect that this is going on in the first place. It's not actually very easy to identify this difficulty telling between yeses and nos as the root cause for our discontent. Then, even upon realizing that maybe we've been ignoring our yeses and ignoring our desires and opting for things that are nos, when deep desires conflict with social norms, it can feel really risky to go against the grain. For example, like quitting your job as a doctor to become a life coach.

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And even upon realizing that you've mixed up your yeses and nos, when you're really good at something, sometimes it's hard to stop, even if you want to. When other people like what you're doing, they can implicitly and explicitly encourage you to keep going. And then they can be disappointed when you stop. And for some people, the sheer prospect of disappointing others or letting people down is wildly uncomfortable. Then, when other people have something to gain from you continuing to do something, saying no can feel very unsafe because it's a departure from what you're supposed to do or from what you're supposed to want to do.

So discerning what is a deep yes from a clear no is really complex. And it's strongly influenced by sociocultural ideology and strongly shaped by experiences in our formative years. But there are classically some folks who struggle more than others with telling the difference between a yes and a no. You might struggle extra if you've had experiences where you've had to chronically ignore how you feel in order to survive. When this happens, you can become disconnected from your inner compass.

It might be more likely to happen to you if you are great at compartmentalizing, because when you're great at compartmentalizing, you may also be great at discounting what your intuition is telling you. Difficulty knowing a yes from a no is much harder if you've experienced trauma, if you've been discriminated against, if you're marginalized in any way that suggests you are intrinsically wrong, inferior, or unworthy.

And last of all, telling the difference between a no and a yes is particularly tricky if you are great at intellectualizing. When you are highly cerebral, which I would wager is the majority of the listeners here, this means you can think your way into or out of anything. Even when your intuition is saying no, and every cell in your body is telling you to run, you can probably rationalize and justify just about anything, even if it's completely antithetical to your identity or to your core desires.

So what is one to do? Discerning between what is in line with what you deeply desire and what lights you up most and what you don't love and

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what is a very solid no comes down to a felt sense, a bodily somatic experience. Call it your inner wisdom, your intuition, your spidey sense. A yes and a no both have characteristic feelings, and both of them can come with a sense of strong clarity once you know what you're looking for. So how can you start to better tell the difference between a yes or a no?

First of all, you can look back. Historically, are there times that you knew something with unwavering certainty? And when you followed that instinct, it was a good idea. It led you to something really amazing. That knowing was what a yes feels like for you. You've probably had a similar experience with a no, where something was definitely not for you. It was wrong or bad in some way. That feeling, that is your no.

For many people, a yes has a somatic signature that is open, light, expansive, clear, settled, grounded, bright, and maybe feels like a relief. Like your shoulders just sinking down just a couple of centimeters. For many people, a no has the bodily sensations that are more constricted, tight, heavy, narrow, diminished, closed in, or even they feel like a desire to pull back, escape, or run. So what does your inner yes and your inner no feel like to you?

Here are three questions that I love teaching my clients to help them discern between a yes and a no. Number one, in the situation you're in, does it feel like a yes from obligation? Number two, with any choice you're making, is there a constriction or an opening? A heaviness or a lightness? Do things feel strained, or do they feel magnetic? Number three, what would you choose if no one else were looking? If you knew your emotional, physical, and financial well-being were guaranteed, what would you do? Those are your yeses. These questions will help you start noticing the relief and alignment and feeling of a yes in contrast to your version of a no.

And then if you need some persuading for why to do this, think about these two things. What would honoring your yeses and your nos open up for you? And what might you be missing out on when you say yes when you mean to say no, and when you habitually say no to what really matters to you?

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Now, you know I like to give caveats. Once you know the difference between a yes and a no, there are a few disconcerting things that can happen. First of all, you might start realizing there are a lot of things in your life that you've been doing that are nos and lots that you haven't been doing that are real desires. And this can be disorienting, and that's okay. This is an essential part of the process of recalibrating from a life that's out of alignment with your values and wants and priorities to one that is more in tune with them.

Also, when you start listening to what's a clean no and what's an absolute hell yes, you're probably going to be facing the potential for other people being disappointed, for other people having questions about what's going on with you. Their disappointment does not mean you are wrong about what you feel.

So this week, I want to encourage you to start noticing what goes on in your body when you say yes when you really want to say no. What goes on in your body when you say no, but you really want to say yes? Ask yourself those questions I mentioned, and they will help you get more clear on your felt experience of yeses and nos.

And as you do this, you'll start remembering what a yes feels like and remembering what a no feels like. You don't have to learn how to do this from scratch. You just have to unlearn some things and remember how to do it. And then once you revive the skill, with practice, it becomes more natural. Knowing the difference between a yes and a no can shape your life and your day-to-day experience in tremendously positive ways. So I hope you found this useful, and I will talk to you more next week. Thank you so much for joining me.

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.