

Ep #208 : Find the Hidden Needs behind Your Habits in 3 Steps



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Today, I'm discussing the needs and desires underneath your habits. What's the real reason that you repetitively do what you do? What is the underlying need hidden behind that habit? Knowing this is one of the missing links to habit change, so let's dive right 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.

Hello, hello, everybody. So this episode is about the needs underneath our habits. So the basic premise of this is our habits are need indicators. They signal a need or desire. So what's this mean? Think of any habit that you have. And by habit, I mean something that you automatically do, something that happens regularly without you thinking much about it. And think about things like overthinking, second-guessing, overeating, overdrinking, procrastination, beating yourself up, perfectionistic thinking. Think of numbing, scrolling, shopping for things you might not need, maybe setting lofty goals and not following through, all or none thinking, that tendency to imagine the worst case scenario without a solution, or compare and despair, or people pleasing.

Any habit that you have that seems deeply ingrained that you would love to change. Behind each and every one of these habits is a need or a desire. The need or desire behind a habituated pattern is usually hidden. It's not super clear. All we see is that we have a habit. But the reason the habit is present is because behind it, underneath it, there is a need or a desire. And when we can identify the hidden need or desire, then we can address that. And this gets us to the heart of the issue, which is the root cause driving our habituated pattern.

And when you can focus on the underlying reason for a habit, that's how you ensure that you can change whatever habit you want to change, and you don't get bogged down in behavioral hacks that just target the surface

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behavior. So let me give you some examples of the desires and needs that can be baked into and behind habits.

Let's take procrastination. On the surface, all we see is that we have a habit of putting things off to the last second. But behind the habit of putting things off might be a desire to avoid feeling inadequate. It might be a desire to avoid failure. And behind that, there could be a need for connection and a need for inclusion.

So here, procrastination as a habit is driven by a desire to avoid messing up and a need to feel connected and included. Or take the habit of making plans that we don't follow through on. On the surface, we repetitively make a plan to exercise, then when it comes time to do it, we don't do it. But underneath this pattern could be a desire to feel capable and competent. The habit of overeating could shelter a need for validation and acknowledgement. Behind the tendency to compare and despair might be a desire for friendship, and behind that, a need to know that you matter.

Now, these needs and desires behind just this handful of examples of habits might seem like really big leaps. So let me elaborate so you can understand. Let's take procrastination. How could procrastination relate to a need to feel connected and included? Say you have a big project or a talk or a proposal or a grant, or say you simply have seven charts that need to be completed. Insert any task, project, goal that you sometimes find really hard to sit down and start chipping away at.

So it's time to get started on this thing, but the idea of starting is awful. You would rather do laundry. You would rather clean the bathroom. Anything besides the project at hand. So why the desire to delay starting? Here's how it goes.

You don't know where to start. You have unanswered questions that feel like they must be answered before you can proceed. You worry you're not going to do a good job if you don't do some more research. You really want

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to do well, and the idea of messing up feels like death. And every time you think about flopping or thinking about messing up, you can imagine colleagues judging you. You can picture people finding out that you're not cut out for the job. The notion of being judged and found out to be the impostor that you feel you are is enough to seek a pile of laundry to fold. Why delay the work? Because starting seems to risk failure. And if you make failure mean something negative about you, you're going to do anything to not have that feeling.

So when failure means you're incapable, procrastination shields you from potentially feeling incapable and seemingly reduces the risk of failing. So now, how do we get from here to procrastination, indicating a desire to feel connected and included? Think about it like this. If when you feel incompetent, you feel alone, like you're inferior, and like you don't belong, no wonder you might procrastinate to avoid feeling like that. So we get to ask, what's the deep need here?

Well, the deep need here is to feel connected and included, to feel a sense of belonging. In this example, starting on a big project runs the risk of failure, which means a risk of feeling incapable. And if, when you feel incapable, you don't believe you belong, and deep down you want to belong, and you want to feel connected and included, this is how procrastination as a habit indicates a desire for connection and belonging.

Now, this is not to say that for all people, procrastination universally signals a desire to belong. This is just to point out that behind a habit where it seems like it's a very clear reason why somebody would procrastinate, they simply don't like doing a job, there's actually something more.

Now, let me do another example so you can understand this even better. And let's take a trickier habit. This is the habit of self-criticism, the habit of a harsh inner critic, and the habit of beating yourself up. The way I'm talking about self-criticism here, self-criticism as a habit is the automatic act of unfavorably evaluating one's behavior, one's performance, or evaluating

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oneself as a whole, i.e., thinking mean, harsh thoughts, cataloging shortcomings, listing off faults, errors, weaknesses. And self-criticism as a habit often leads to feeling really bad about yourself and emotions like discouragement, guilt, worthlessness, anxiety, depression, etc.

Now, I don't know about you, but my inner critic is opportunistic to the core. The part of me that's really critical, give that part any opportunity, and they will find a way to turn it into an indictment. Make a mistake, sounds like, clearly, you're a screw-up. Get through a bunch of travel stressors with your family, your inner critic says, "Well, you wouldn't have had all that stress if you weren't so impatient and bossy." Get thanked by somebody, get a genuine compliment, and the critic may offer, they must be delusional. If they really knew, they wouldn't thank you. This is totally a fluke. Don't let your head get too big.

So if it's true that behind every habit is a need or a desire, what could the underlying need be for the habit of self-criticism? So let's investigate this hypothetical with my hypothetical character, Penny. Penny speaks up at a meeting, and then her comment seems to elicit crickets. Nobody says anything, nobody asks any questions, and then the subject has changed. After the meeting, she thinks, what was I thinking? How dumb. I shouldn't have said anything. Everyone is going to think I am unintelligent at best, a liability at worst. I'm always screwing up. I don't even know how to speak my truth in a room of colleagues. I screw up all the time. I fail at everything I do.

Now, in Penny's case, the need signaled by the self-criticism could be a desire to be seen and heard. And behind that, there could be a desire to make things make sense and a need to be accepted as she is, as her authentic self. Now, how's this possible? How is her self-criticism a signal for a need to be seen, a need to make things make sense, and to feel accepted?

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For this hypothetical Penny, her inner critic surfaces after her comment isn't acknowledged. This is only problematic for her because of an underlying desire to be seen and heard. If this desire of hers weren't so strong, she might say what she says at the meeting, have crickets, have the subject be changed, and then conclude that the silence was because people agreed with her brilliant comment. People took her as the authority with the last word, and then they moved on.

But since she perceives that she's not seen and heard, to the internal microphone comes her inner critic. In order to make things make sense, her critic surfaces to explain it all. Crickets happened because you suck. You always will, and they know it. This interpretation is negative, but at least it paints a cohesive picture. It makes it make sense why she got silence. Albeit negative, this meets her desire to explain her experience. In Penny's case, her concern is that if she didn't criticize herself, she'd just keep speaking up and risk rejection. And this seems like a risk because deep down, she wants to be accepted for who she is.

So in this way, her habit of self-criticism occurs because of a desire to be accepted. It occurs because she has a desire to explain and understand things, and she has a very human need to feel seen and heard. So in this case, the habit of self-criticism is driven by a need to feel seen and heard. Not everyone's habit of self-criticism signals a need for acceptance or a need to be seen or heard. But every habit we have indeed indicates that there is some less than clear, hidden, stealthy, underlying need or desire. And these needs and desires are almost always related to our values.

Now, I could go on and on and on and give you examples of other habits that have stealthy needs behind them. But suffice it to say, habits are like breadcrumbs. They lead us to our needs and desires and the work we need to do. And if we are open to the messages that they have, they will help us understand ourselves better.

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Now, why does this matter? When you know the need or desire beneath any of your habits, then you can address that need or desire. If you don't know it, you may spend inordinate amounts of energy trying to change a behavior solely from the outside in with things like habit trackers or really strong willpower alone, or setting rules, or using a screen time limiting app, or hiding sweet treats, etc. But when you know the underlying need or desire, that is how you can start changing a habit from the inside out.

So let's recap. Habits, they're the automatic ways that we show up in the world. They're the ways we think, the ways we feel, the ways we act when we're on autopilot. And they indicate needs and desires. And these needs and desires are usually hidden. Once we identify the need or desire under a habit, we can address that need or desire. And in turn, this helps us change our habit in much more of an effective way.

So how can you start the process of identifying the need or the desire underneath your habits? Well, lucky you, you don't need to get a master's in psychology or no magic to find this. What you do need is to have an interest and an open mind, and the following steps. There are three steps to do this. Step one, do a U-turn. Step two, find the worry. And step three, tend to the need. So when you are in the middle of doing a habit that you'd like to change, or you notice you are about to do a habit that you'd like to change, take these three steps. Let me explain.

Step number one is to do a U-turn. If you haven't already listened to episode 115, after you're done, go listen to that because it describes the power of doing a U-turn. In short, to do a U-turn, as soon as you notice a strong feeling or a powerful reaction towards something in the external world, pause, check in with yourself and put your attention inward and do as John Palmer says, go in and down, away from your thinking mind, down to your body, and find out what's coming up inside you. This can be emotions, feelings, sensations in your body, or thoughts. It can also be impulses, like an impulse to run, an impulse to hide, an impulse to lash out.

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Once you do this U-turn and you look within, then take a breath. Do not rush to fix anything. Do not rush to figure anything out. Don't rush to change anything. Just breathe and see if you can get just a little curious about what there is to learn here.

Then, step number two. With the habit that you are doing or are about to do, say overthink, or beat yourself up, or compare, or make a self-deprecating comment, ask yourself, what am I worried would happen if I didn't do blank? What am I worried would happen if I didn't people-please? What am I worried would happen if I didn't berate myself? What am I concerned would happen if I didn't open up my phone and scroll and check out the J. Crew sales and do Wordle? The answer to this question will point you to the underlying concern.

For example, what am I worried would happen if I didn't people-please? Well, I might not be seen as a team player. So what would be so bad about that? Well, then I'd be rejected and judged. So here, the underlying need is to feel accepted. Or, what am I worried would happen if I didn't berate myself? Well, I'd make even bigger mistakes. I might get fired. I might lose an income. So here, the underlying need is for a sense of safety, security, and to feel resourceful, to feel like I can handle anything that comes my way.

What am I concerned would happen if I didn't open my phone, scroll and look at the J. Crew sales page, and do a New York Times puzzle? Well, I might feel awkward and like I don't belong. So the underlying desire is to feel confident and a sense of belonging. Or maybe the answer is, I'd feel overwhelmed, and I would get curt with my family, and then I'd feel guilty. So the underlying need that the phone and the shopping indicates here is a need to feel untroubled, a need to feel free, a desire for more time, a desire for connection.

So first, do a U-turn. Second, ask, What am I worried would happen if I didn't do this thing? And then number three, given this worry or concern,

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what do I need most in this moment? Maybe you desire acceptance. So, before you people please and say yes when you want to say no, maybe you find one of your ride or die friends who is your soft landing spot, and you get a dose of unconditional love from them. Or maybe you give yourself a reminder about what actually matters most to you, and you remind yourself that you love and accept you. Whatever the need is, see what you can do to address it.

And what you'll find when you do this is that you start tending to the root causes of your habits. You will also notice that when you're armed with the information about what need or desire your habit reveals, you're going to be able to anticipate that need surfacing in situations where this habit surfaces. And this can help you prepare to and support yourself better in these predictable scenarios.

So take the example of hypothetical Penny criticizing herself after speaking up at a meeting. Knowing that she has a tendency to do this before her next meeting, she can anticipate the habit of self-criticism. Before the meeting, she can remind herself that she has a need to be seen and heard, and she can remind herself that she has a need to make things make sense. And her default is to presume that she's the problem.

But underneath that, she just wants to be accepted for who she is. Knowing this, she can realize that a part of her is primed to detect judgment and might detect it where it doesn't exist. And she can remind herself that meetings, they just might not be the most reliable place for the desire to be seen and heard to be reliably met. And she just might adjust her expectations accordingly. She might remind herself that meetings, they're the bane of everyone's existence. Some people are distracted and tuned out, and she might tell herself, I can do my best to explain this in a way that people can understand, but I can't control how other people respond. All I can control is how I respond and how I tend to my nervous system.

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Then for the meeting, she'll be more likely to catch her self-criticism before she's stuck in a cyclone of self-loathing. And this is how the deeply ingrained habit of self-criticism can start to shift.

So let's review, shall we? Habits are indicators of needs and desires that are often hidden. Following these breadcrumbs of our habits to the underlying desires and needs gives clarity around why we do what we do.

To find the needs behind your habits, there are three steps. Number one, take a U-turn. Number two, ask, What am I worried would happen if? And number three, ask yourself, What do I need most in this moment? Then take what you learn from this experience and use it to prepare yourself for other situations when your habit occurs.

Now, this process that I just took you through is precisely what we do in coaching. We peel back the layers of patterned ways of behaving and emotionally responding and thinking, and we look for the root causes so you can then rewire new habits from the inside out. I hope you find this inner exploration to be high-yield. And if you need any help, if you have any questions, go to habitsonpurpose.com, join my email list, and you can always reply to me there. I read every email. I will see you next 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.