

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change



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With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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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.

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Hello, hello everybody. So what I want to talk to you about today is pragmatic curiosity. So, what the heck is pragmatic curiosity as opposed to regular curiosity? Well, I will let you know. The way I want to talk to you about this is I first want to just flesh out a little bit about what curiosity is and what curiosity isn't, and then talk about what I mean when I say pragmatic curiosity. And then talk to you about how it's super useful to use pragmatic curiosity when it comes to cultivating habits on purpose and when it comes to habit change.

First, let's talk about what curiosity is. The way I think about curiosity is it's a state of being marked by a very strong desire to learn or seek to understand things. It's a desire to appreciate the why behind reactions and feelings and thoughts and how things came to be. To be curious is to be open to possibilities. When you're curious, you have a beginner's mind, right? So to be curious is to be really inquisitive without any self-consciousness, without any preconceptions, and it's a state where you are non-judgmentally interested.

Now, Richard Schwartz says this about curiosity. "If we don't prejudge things, we are perpetually curious. Like an inquisitive child, we are full of

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change

innocent interest in people and their reactions. So, if people are angry at us, and our view of them is not clouded by feelings connected with others who have been angry at us in the past, we become curious about their anger. When we ask them about it, they will sense no fear or judgment in our question, just innocent interest."

And to paraphrase what he says a little bit further, he says, "Pure, guileless curiosity is disarming because the intent is pure understanding." So, curiosity can be both cognitive and somatic, meaning it can be something we experience in our head with our intellect, where we wonder how things came to be, and we have a just a pure fascination with something in our mind. But curiosity can also have a felt sense in your body.

Think about the last time that you were curious in your mind and what your body felt like. Usually, when you have whole-body curiosity, it's characterized by an openness and a leaning forward or just a receptiveness. And it may be hard to put into words, but just notice the next time that you're really curious about something, how your body feels.

So that's what curiosity is, but let's talk about what masquerades as curiosity. Sometimes we can think we're being very curious when really we're seeking to understand something so that we can change it. We're seeking to learn about something with the agenda of fixing it or improving it.

Curiosity is not rooted in persuading or convincing someone of a different point of view, and curiosity, it's without judgment or assumption. So if we're going into something and we think we're being super curious, but in the back of our mind, really we already have sort of made up our mind or we have a pretty strong judgment about something, or we have an agenda for what we want to accomplish by being inquisitive, that's not really curiosity.

Curiosity is pretty much without any agenda other than understanding. And when it comes to understanding others, it's an understanding of their point of view, their experience, their perspective without exporting our ideas onto

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change

them. Now, what on earth does curiosity have to do with habits and habit change? Well, there are three main things.

For one, curiosity is a cultivatable state, meaning it's a state of mind, a state of being that you can cultivate on purpose that can help you really understand why you do what you do. When you have a big reaction to something, when you get activated by something that somebody says, when you find yourself quote "triggered," or say you have a recurrent pattern that you really can't seem to get out of, curiosity is paramount for tracing the breadcrumbs back to the root cause for why you do what you do, respond as you respond, and for why you think and believe the way you think and believe.

When you drop preconceptions, you can access deeper truths. When you are deeply curious without preconceptions, this is how you can get to the heart of what's really going on for you and for others.

So you might wonder why you crave to do big things, but you can never get started. When you reflect on this from a place of a little bit of judgment, wanting to fix things and critique what's going on in yourself, you might drop into some judgment, into some comparison, and find yourself thinking, "Well, you know what? Other people who go and do this goal that I have, they can do it. There must be something wrong with me that I can't."

When you investigate with a desire to fix, you might get really flummoxed because what do you do when contradictory things show up? So, say your big goal requires being very public and being very social. But when you're curious and trying to fix things, you realize that a part of you hates the extroverted socializing that's inherent in getting your message out. So how do you fix that? When you start with curiosity that's infused with wanting to fix, and you run into things that seem contradictory, you might just stop exploring. Versus, when you're curious without trying to fix, you can simply discover that perhaps you might have two things that can be true at the same time.

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change

So in this example, a part of you has big dreams and will not rest until you have gone for them. And another part of you prefers the quiet life. Nothing to fix, just two facets that make you. Now, what else does curiosity have to do with habits and habit change? Well, the second thing is curiosity helps with interpersonal relationships and some of the habituated patterns that play out with other people.

Now, we could do an entire year of episodes on the intricacies of communication and relationships, et cetera. But in short, when you approach others with guileless curiosity, you get a chance to truly understand them better. When there's curiosity, there's less defaulting to judgment, to blame, to defensiveness. There's less taking things personally. Instead, when there's curiosity, there's more of a default to connection.

Curiosity also opens the door to compassion. When you can be curious about someone's reaction or someone's experience, then you get access to that behind-the-scenes set of motives and feelings behind their behaviors. And when you have access to these hidden backstories, sometimes it can make even the most unsavory behavior worthy of compassion and warmth. When you have access to compassion and warmth, then you might not show up with the habit of people-pleasing, of taking things so personally, of being really reactive, of blaming people for your experience. And this can radically alter your experience of interacting with other people.

Now, lastly, curiosity is important for habits because it's an antidote to so many of the rigid habits, things like all-or-nothing thinking. When you get curious, you open yourself up to the gray zone and the possibilities between what initially seem like your only two options.

Take perfectionism and that rigidity of needing to always achieve to feel worthy. These things can soften when you get curious for why you feel the need to do this. Numbing habits like excess phone use, shopping, eating, drinking, TV, et cetera, they can lose some of their compulsive pull when you deliberately insert a bolus of curiosity before you reach for the bottle of wine, before you reach for the remote, before you reach for your phone.

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change

Let's take the specific example of procrastination. Say you have a presentation to complete. The slides are not made, but you have a general idea of the concept that you want to communicate. Every time you sit down to start, you end up with a really clean house. Your laundry gets folded, your discharge summaries are done, you have thoroughly scoured and scrolled through all the Facebook and Instagram posts, and you're not sure why you procrastinate, but you do, and you do it repetitively. And it drives you nuts because you know that you do better when you get started, and you don't have to cram everything in at the last minute.

So when you bring in curiosity, it's like bringing in an expert consultant who can open your eyes to what's actually going on. So the next time you notice that maybe you dread starting something that you've repetitively put off, what you do is you stop and you name that a part of you is procrastinating. Maybe a part of you feels dread. A part of you says, "It's been a long day, we deserve to rest. It'll be fine. Let's deal with it later."

Then, once you have named what's going on, you get curious on purpose and you check in. You get curious to understand what's the why behind this procrastination? Just like you might want to understand a friend who's struggling with the same thing. With a beginner's mind, open and free of judgment, you might ask, how come this is so hard for me to start? What is really going on here? How am I feeling? What am I worried about? What am I worried would happen if I did get started? What could I do to make it easier to start?

Now, these are just examples because there's no script for when you're being curious. When you are fully curious, you just get to wonder and ask and investigate. So curiosity is really helpful for self-understanding. It's helpful for relationships and interpersonal communication, and it is a great way to counter almost every common habit of overthinking, perfectionistic, high-achieving people.

Yet there is a risk to curiosity when it's passive. If you are really cerebral and you're great at living in your head, curiosity can be a way to not take

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change

any action. You can get really busy and engrossed in wondering and reflecting and exploring without doing anything. Which is why I advocate that my clients cultivate what I call pragmatic curiosity.

Now, this is not curiosity with an agenda, but it's a way to keep curiosity from being amorphous and make sure that it is concrete. So what's pragmatic curiosity? Pragmatic curiosity is leveraging curiosity so that you do something with what you learn. To practice pragmatic curiosity means you're not passive about your musings and your inquiries. You're interested, you have a desire to learn and understand, and then you take what you now know, and you use it in some concrete way.

So, when you're curious, what do you typically do with what you learn? Do you think about it? Do you act on it? Do you write it down in your journal? Do you make it concrete? What do you do?

For years, I have really been good at analyzing things, speculating on things, noodling on things in my mind, and sometimes not taking the next step to doing things that were really actionable. So I can relate if you are one of those people who does a lot of work in your mind and maybe not as much work on the outside. It is very easy to be curious and then let your new learning sit on the shelf.

But here's the thing, the way that you make meaningful changes, the way that you move toward a goal is to take what you learn and apply it. So let's take that procrastination example. You can get really curious about why you procrastinate and maybe learn that you're deeply disinterested in the task at hand. And that's good to know. Pragmatic curiosity takes the next step. What are you going to do about this deep disinterest?

Are you going to try to make this task as fun as possible? Maybe you do the work with a friend or you go to a coffee shop or you play some music? Are you going to delegate this work out to someone else? Are you going to next time refrain from signing up for this kind of thing so that you don't have to do this thing that you're deeply disinterested in the future?

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change

Or say you get really curious and you realize that you procrastinate out of a fear of messing up. Now what? You just stop there and say, "Well, scared that I'm going to mess up. I guess that's why I procrastinate." No. The knowledge can wither on the vine if you don't do something with it. Pragmatic curiosity is taking that insight and deciding how you're going to handle things moving forward.

Could you maybe examine your beliefs about failure? Could you decide to go on a failure desensitization campaign and give yourself goals that you're going to accomplish no matter what, even though you know you're going to fail? What could you do to support the part of you that's really worried about messing up while you also get started on the work? How can you take the insight and use it to make a discrete step forward instead of staying and kind of languishing in procrastination hell?

Now, last week, I gave you about 20 questions that I find to be really powerful for helping me get unstuck. And the efficacy of these questions in that episode lies in the fact that they make pragmatic curiosity possible. So if you haven't listened, go back and listen to that one.

Now, there's a very simple formula for pragmatic curiosity. Number one, get curious. Number two, do something with what you learn. This is really simple, but it's actually not easy, and it's a game-changer if you will apply it and let it be the game-changer that it is.

So, let's take this and make it into an actionable thing that you can do this week. I want you to think of some dilemma that you have facing you. Maybe it's a decision you need to make. Maybe it's a really sticky habit you've got. Maybe it's some sort of recurrent pattern or interaction that you have with someone. Maybe it's a goal that you're grappling with.

Get a sheet of paper or your computer, and I want you to write that topic at the top. Then, put on your journalist's or your researcher's hat, get out your beginner's mind, drop all the preconceptions that you can, suspend your usual assumptions, and I want you to write down all the questions you have

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change

about this topic. Your goal is to really understand what's going on for yourself in this experience.

Now, the way to do this is to get very, very purely curious. So remember the way I defined curiosity at the beginning. It's a state of being marked by a strong desire to learn, a desire to understand and to appreciate the why behind what's going on. The why of feelings and thoughts and reactions. It's being really open to possibilities. It's being inquisitive and interested without judgment.

So see if you can get curious about what there is to learn about whatever it is that you're facing or experiencing or feeling or stressed about or struggling with. Dump all the ideas out, dump all your questions out, dump all the answers out, and then close up your computer, put your notebook away, and totally leave it until the next day. On day two, read over what you wrote and make a list of three concrete things that you can now go do based on what you learned.

So maybe you learned that your overwhelm happens more often when you haven't gotten great sleep. So what you do is you make a list of three things that you can commit to doing to go get an extra hour of rest. Or maybe you discover that you spend all day putting out fires at work, and while you do this, you suppress your irritation and you keep a nice diplomatic smile on your face, all to find yourself fly off the handle with road rage on your commute home or with your partner when you get into the house. So with this knowledge, you decide to build in a closing ritual to get grounded before you go home. Whatever it is, you do a closing ritual before you walk into your house or before you get into your car.

Now, these are just examples. The specifics that you discover, they will be uniquely yours. But the key is to get wide-open and curious, and then come up with three practical things you can do that you go execute on so that you can make some real-world practical steps that are informed by what you've learned.

Ep #210 : Using Pragmatic Curiosity for Real Habit Change

And this is how you practice pragmatic curiosity. This is how you ensure that you don't just live in your head. You don't just have a boatload of great insights and ideas that you don't take action on. Because when you do that, you end up becoming a very well-educated, well-informed, very smart, insightful person who keeps having the same Groundhog Day struggles because the insights remain inside instead of making it out into the real world. So thanks for listening, and I will talk to 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.