

Ep #214: Using Curiosity and Compassion to Change Your Habits



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Today, we're going to take a closer look at habits through the lens of Internal Family Systems, or IFS, and combine it with the idea that I absolutely love, that was recently popularized by Dr. Becky Kennedy in her book *Good Inside*, and this idea is called “the most generous interpretation.”

Pairing IFS with habits and the concept of the most generous interpretation not only help us understand our habits better, but gives a kinder, more compassionate way to engage with ourselves as we work on making lasting change. 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.

Hello, hello everybody. Today, I'm going to talk about the intersection of Internal Family Systems, habits, and the concept of “the most generous interpretation”. Today's episode is one I've been really excited to share, because it weaves together some really powerful ideas that can fundamentally change how you approach your habits, your inner world, and ultimately, your life.

If you've ever found yourself stuck in a cycle of habits that don't serve you, habits that you might even think are just part of who you are, this episode is for you. We'll explore how our habits are learned solutions, driven by parts of us that have great intentions, even if the results aren't always what we want. And we'll discuss how adopting “the most generous interpretation” can be a game changer in how we relate to ourselves and how we relate to others.

Let me first start off with some definitions and discuss what exactly I mean when I use the phrase “habits”. If you've been with me for a while, you know that when I think of the word “habits”, I think of something different than we conventionally think of.

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Habits are not just the way we brush our teeth or how we automatically cross our legs when we sit down. Habits are much more than this. The way I see them, they're repetitive ways that we think, feel, and act, often without even realizing that we're doing it.

Habits are learned ways of thinking, learned patterns of emotionally responding, and learned behaviors that are so automatic and ingrained that they might feel like part of your identity.

But here's the truth, habits are more malleable than we think. And they're not fixed traits, they're protective. They're adaptive strategies that we've developed over decades, often based on having gone through something painful and often framed by socialized beliefs. As such, because they're learned, they can be unlearned.

So now let's use Internal Family Systems, or IFS, to think about habits. If you want to learn more about IFS, there are so many great resources. In this podcast, you can check out Episode #75, Episode #49, and Episode #130, which we'll link in the show notes so that you can go there and just click on the related episodes.

And you can also check out some of the texts that are out there. No Bad Parts is the book written by the founder of IFS, Dr. Richard Schwartz. He also has a great book called You Are the One You've Been Waiting For: Bringing Courageous Love to Intimate Relationships.

In a nutshell, IFS explains that our mind is not one mind filled with all sorts of contradictory thoughts and impulses. But our mind is a multiplicity, kind of like what's humorously portrayed in that animated film Inside Out.

And most of us have experienced having different parts of us. We might have a part that likes to be on time, and a part that just wants to stay in bed and snooze. We might have a part that's excited about seeing our friend for dinner, and a part that finds this friend annoying and just wants to stay in, wrapped up in a blanket and read.

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Notice some of the parts that I mentioned here and see if you can relate to some of these. We might have parts that keep track of time, parts that are perfectionistic and like to control everything, parts that are caretakers and have to take care of everyone in order to feel okay, parts that are anxious like Chicken Little and have a penchant for being really alarmed by potential catastrophes that haven't even happened.

We might have parts that obsess over food, either overeating food or restricting food. Parts that say “F- it” and want to eat and scroll and drink and use mood altering substances or whatever to numb pain. We might have parts that keep us focused on our appearance, that love to shop and that are really, really interested in material items.

We might have parts that constantly blame others or parts that relentlessly criticize us and feel like we need to improve. IFS offers this framework, for thinking about the human mind, that I have found to be so useful.

So let's keep it concrete. Say somebody comes up to you and says, “Hey, let me show you this thing,” and they pull out their phone and they show you a photo on their phone. You might have a part that feels really included, a part that's happy for your friend, a part that's annoyed and doesn't really care, and a part that's jealous of the fancy vacation that she's showing you.

Now IFS doesn't just stop there, with the mind as a multiplicity, it goes on to explain that these different parts of us can organize into particular categories and particular roles. The main categories are called Exiles, Managers and Firefighters. Exiles, Managers and Firefighters have a prototypical dynamic that forms the basis for many of the trickiest habits.

Let me explain. Say at some point in our life we were excluded or made fun of or told that we weren't good enough. IFS would describe that we develop a part that holds the hurt of that experience. This part is termed an “Exile part”.

And in response to this Exile part that holds a painful belief or is burdened by a painful emotion, another part can develop to prevent us from having to

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feel that way ever again. So this Exile part holds the pain of say, feeling unworthy or feeling rejected.

And a Manager part may develop that is always vigilant for subtle signs of rejection, has us microanalyzing social cues and body language, anticipates other people's desires, in order to be ever accommodating and pleasing, in order to fit in and be liked and not feel like we felt before.

A Manager part is a protective part that's very proactive and never again wants the exile part to be triggered, and never again wants those feelings of inadequacy or shame or not belonging or not feeling good enough to flood over us.

But since sometimes the best prevention strategies are not enough, life is life and life happens, if something happens and we feel flooded with this old hurt, to the rescue might come another part, the Firefighter part.

Firefighter parts work to douse the proverbial flames of emotion with something soothing: escapism with a substance, burying ourselves in work, exercise, food, scrolling, or fight or flight; fight in the form of getting really angry, blaming others, or flight in the form of trying to leave a situation, shutting down, withdrawing.

So this trio of Exile parts holding old pain, prevention-oriented Managers, and problem-fixing Firefighter parts present in a classic repeated way. Managers work to prevent. Life happens and an Exile is triggered anyway. Firefighters show up to soothe. Managers return online to prevent, and so on and so forth.

The way I see it, our habits are simply repeated sequences of Manager parts, Exile parts and Firefighter parts showing up. So I want to invite you to reflect on your life right now.

Do you have experiences or do you notice parts of you that fall into these categories? When do they show up? What's it like for you when they show up? What's kind of their typical pattern?

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Now let's move on to the concept of using “the most generous interpretation.” This concept of “the most generous interpretation” was recently popularized by Dr. Becky Kennedy. Giving the most generous interpretation means that when faced with a behavior from someone else, a child, a colleague, a partner, if we deploy the most generous interpretation, we are on purpose choosing to see their behavior in the most generous way possible.

So say somebody gets really snippy at a work meeting, you could instantly think, “What a jerk, who acts like that? We'll show her.” But the most generous interpretation would be to think, “Huh, that snippiness really stands out. That is a good person having a hard day. I wonder what's going on for them that makes that response make sense?”

As Dr. Kennedy says, “There's nothing more valuable than learning to find our goodness under our struggles, because this leads to an increased capacity to reflect and change.”

So, I want to invite you to use this idea, of purposely giving the most generous interpretation, to yourself as well. Now, this idea isn't new, it may sound really familiar. Marshall Rosenberg's work with nonviolent communication emphasizes the importance of interpreting behavior through the lens of unmet needs and positive intentions.

Brené Brown talks about giving the benefit of the doubt and using empathy and compassion to interpret other people's actions. Kristen Neff, a leading researcher on self-compassion, she discusses how kindness and understanding can lead to healthier relationships as well as increased wellbeing.

Stephen Covey, famous for *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, encourages people to seek first to understand and then to be understood. Individuals like Tara Brock, the Gottman's, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and so many others all have teachings that underscore this

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fundamental idea of assuming positive intent, even when it's perhaps buried behind the most unsavory behavior.

And Dr. Becky Kennedy has so nicely articulated and encapsulated this idea in such an easy to remember phrase, “the most generous interpretation”.

So, what's the most generous interpretation and deliberately assuming positive intent have to do with habits and IFS? Well, when we can assume positive intent and look for the most generous interpretation of our own habits, we then open ourselves up to understanding why our parts do what they do. And from the IFS perspective, this is how we access the energy of Self with a capital “S”.

Let's take people pleasing. This tendency might have you struggling to say no, overworking, having no boundaries, and feeling like a hollow shell of yourself because everyone comes first and you come last.

Now, you could disdainfully look on the habit of people pleasing and judge yourself for it. Maybe you take a workshop on assertiveness and you work actively to set boundaries. But the other way to approach people pleasing when you use IFS and “the most generous interpretation” is to get curious.

“Huh, how come it makes sense for me to have a part that people pleases?” Then, with introspection, you may discover a part of you that developed the habit of people pleasing to perhaps avoid conflict and maintain harmony.

Maybe, at one point in time, this part strategy might have been critically protective for you, perhaps in a family environment where conflict was unsafe. Or it was a really resourceful response when maybe you were a new kid at school and fitting in hinged on other kids liking you.

“The most generous interpretation” opens you up to curiosity and compassion. It helps ask, what's the positive intent with this habituated pattern? And then IFS language helps describe it. “Oh, a part felt powerless

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in family conflict. Another part learned to people please. Oh, my people pleasing is simply an effort to avoid feeling powerless. My people pleasing part was trying to help me avoid feeling like I didn't belong in middle school when we moved.”

By curiously and compassionately looking at our habits and seeing them as driven by parts of us that have a positive, protective, adaptive intention, this shifts how we think of habits altogether.

Then we don't have the “bad” habit of people pleasing that we need to fix. Rather, we simply have a repeated pattern that arises from a variety of parts just doing the best they can with what they know. And we can work to understand these parts, validate these parts, and then deeply understand how they make sense.

And it's this latter approach that opens us up to real healing and then real change. So, I want to emphasize, your habits, they're not flaws. They're just the automatic presentation of parts that are attempting to protect or support you in some way.

Now let's take another example. Let's take procrastination. On the surface, procrastination can seem like laziness or just avoidance. But if we apply IFS and “the most generous interpretation”, we might learn that procrastination is driven by a part attempting to help another part not feel like a failure.

This Manager part has learned that by delaying taking action, it's a way to protect you from the pain of not measuring up, the discomfort of vulnerability. Knowing this, you don't then need productivity hacks so much as you now know that you need to address the part that's scared of failure.

And then, when you can understand the root cause of the fear, where it came from, why it's still here today, this is when procrastination is less likely to be an appealing solution. Make sense? All of our habits are windows into the parts that are showing up for us.

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Many of our habits are driven by protective Managers. Many habits are driven by protective firefighters, all of whom are working on behalf of Exile parts. And it's in this way that our habits are strategic, adaptive, learned solutions for something, for some discomfort.

And if we overlook finding that root cause, we end up doing a bunch more superficial efforts to change a habit that might work for a week or a month or maybe even six months, but really, they end up pointing in the wrong direction and having us waste a lot of precious time and energy because we're focused on the wrong layer.

Now, I don't know about you, but some of my habits have felt so deeply ingrained that I mistook them for intrinsic personality traits. But when we see habits through the lens of IFS, we can see how they arise from the interplay of different parts; parts that learned something in relation to a painful experience.

Let me give you another example to reinforce this idea, because what we're talking about here, it's quite complex. It's a very unconventional way to look at habits.

An Exile part might hold on to the painful burden of believing that you're not good enough, believing that vulnerability is dangerous and that you have to be perfect in order to be loved. A perfectionistic protector part constantly will strive to avoid mistakes and strive to show up flawlessly. So, from the outside, to your friends, to your family, to your colleagues, you are known as a detail-oriented, type-A high achiever.

But when something doesn't go perfectly, when there is a mistake, when the plan doesn't go as planned, you are consciously or subconsciously flooded with shame, with believing you're not good enough, with feeling like the world has come to an end. These are the emotions of that Exile part.

And the next thing you know, maybe you're drunk, binge-watching Netflix and shopping for things that you don't need because the Firefighter part helps take the pain of the shame away.

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And when you want to change your habit of buzz shopping after a hard day at work, setting limits on drinks, and deleting your shopping app from your phone, well, they don't work because they don't address the root cause behind this habit you want to change.

In this scenario, if you see the drinking and shopping and TV through “the most generous interpretation” lens and you look for the parts that are involved, it helps you avoid superficial efforts for change.

Now, this entire episode is an unfamiliar way to look at things, I recognize that. It's quite complex. So, if you need to take another listen, I encourage you to do so. And as you do, think about your own parts. Think about your own habits and how they can be driven by different parts that are working on your behalf with great intention for you.

And as always, I want to leave you with something really practical that you can start applying in your everyday life. Here's a practical exercise that you can start today, it's just got two parts to it.

Number one: Pause and notice. When you catch yourself in a habitual thought, having a habitual feeling or doing a habitual action, pause. Simply notice what's happening and try to notice it without judgment. Name it. “It sounds like this... This is me procrastinating. This is people-pleasing. This is self-criticism. This is me being hyper-controlling under the guise of offering kind advice. This is me buffering with my phone.”

Just pause, notice, and name.

Number two: Apply “the most generous interpretation”. Or like I like to teach, use CCOP (Compassion and Curiosity On Purpose). Ask yourself: What might be the positive intent behind this habit?

I'm also going to reference Seth Kopsal here. He wrote a great book called Self-Led, and he will oftentimes recommend asking: Who is here? Who's making me do this? Who just said that? When you ask it in this way, you can sometimes get access to the part that is most present for you.

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Now, when you do the second part of this exercise, and you apply “the most generous interpretation” and ask these questions, I'm going to encourage you strongly to not get all analytical with your answers. Instead, ask the question with an open heart and wait for the answer to bubble up from inside your psyche.

The answer might come in the form of a memory, an image, a sensation. It might come in the form of an impulse or an emotion, or it might also be words. But just listen with a curious, open-hearted energy and you will be more likely to find something useful than if you start analyzing and overthinking and trying to find it with your cognitive mind.

Let's recap. Habits are not just your morning routine; brushing your teeth, checking your phone first thing in the morning, opening your email after you leave a patient's room, or how you like to make your coffee. Habits are so much more than just the physical routines we engage in. Habits actually encompass the repetitive patterns of thinking, feeling and acting that we do when we are on autopilot.

We experience life with a variety of different parts of us, and these parts can organize into categories and roles. Exiles that carry the burden of painful beliefs or emotions. Managers that work to prevent Exiles from being activated. And Firefighter parts that come in when all else fails to soothe us or distract us.

Our habits can be seen as a predictable cycle of Manager, Firefighter and Exile part activity.

Then “the most generous interpretation” helps us interpret our behavior, our parts, our habits, with compassion and curiosity so that we can understand the “why” behind the face-value pattern. And when we do this with ourselves, it makes it so much easier to do it with others.

Your action to apply this week is to look for your habitual thoughts, habitual feelings and habitual behaviors. And when you notice them, pause. Pause and notice what's going on for you and name it.

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And step two is to channel CCOP, or compassion and curiosity on purpose, with “the most generous interpretation” and ask: What might be the positive intent behind this habit? What is this part trying to help me protect or accomplish? Who is making me do this?

Thank you so much for listening. I so hope that you found this topic helpful as a way to frame thinking about your habits. Take care, and I’ll talk to you soon.

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.