

Ep #215: Breaking the Habit of Saying Yes at Your Own Expense



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With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Today's episode is all about one of the most challenging things for high achievers, saying no. We're going to explore why it's so hard to say no and how to stop guilt driven rumination and catastrophizing, and then how to confidently prioritize what really matters to you.

So if you are tired of feeling overextended, struggling with guilt, saying yes at your own expense, or worrying about what other people think, this episode is for you. Let's dive 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. I am delighted to be here recording this with you. So today we're going to talk about something that so many of us grapple with, saying no. If you are someone who finds it hard to say no, even when you're already stretched too thin, you're not alone.

The struggle to say no is deeply rooted in societal expectations, fears of disappointing other people, worries about how we'll be perceived, etc. So I want to unpack this phenomenon that really is something I hear so much about for my clients, and something that I for so long really struggled with, even in stealthy ways that I didn't really realize were related to it, an angst about saying no.

I want to unpack it so that you can understand how come this might be a struggle for you and understand what you can do about it so you can learn some practical steps so that you can say no with ease and with confidence.

Let's first talk about what it looks like to say yes at your own expense, what it looks like to not say no when you would like to say no, and then we'll unravel why saying no actually can feel so difficult.

So the reason why I want to talk about what it can look like when you don't say no is that it's not just as simple as saying yes every time somebody

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asks you something, even if you don't want to. So it's not just saying yes and then regretting it later.

It can be implicitly saying yes when you would prefer to say no. It can be giving when you shouldn't be giving. So let me just sort of go through some examples of what it can look like to not say no, and to over say yes, which we could lump all together in people pleasing, but this is actually a very specific variant of people pleasing.

So not saying no can look like simply overextending. It can look like doing things for other people, but not protecting time to do things for yourself and possibly not even noticing it. An example of this is you look at your kid's schedule and you say, "You know what? I can drive so-and-so here and pick up so-and-so from there. And I can make the lunches, and I can volunteer at this thing, and I can also go run and get to the gym and probably do this."

And it all seems really reasonable. If you haven't listened to the episode on shoehorning, we'll put that in the show notes. But it's overextending, and kind of not even realizing that you didn't put anywhere in your schedule the critical time that you need for yourself.

So say you really like to exercise every day and you have a "non-negotiable" 30 minutes to an hour that you spend. And then you happen to be like, "I'm just going to do all these other things," because you know that they're reasonable to do, and you don't realize that what's fallen off the list is you. That is not saying no by overextending.

Struggling to say no can look like somebody tells you, "Hey, there's these two things that we need to do. And whichever one you want to do is totally fine. I'll do the other one." And then, instead of picking the thing that you actually want, you pick the thing that you think the other person doesn't want so that you can be helpful.

Even if it's at your own expense, struggling to say no can be saying that you don't mind when deep down you really do mind. It can be when

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somebody volunteers to take something off your plate and you decline the offer. "Oh no, no, that's okay. I've got it. I'm fine. It's great. It's totally fine."

Struggling to say no could be, "Could you work this in? Could you see this parent? Could you see this patient? Could you take this one call? Could you answer just this one question? Do you have just a minute?" And suppressing that internal, "No, I don't have time. There's no possible way," and squashing it. And on the outside saying "sure", even though really you should say no.

So if any of this is familiar, if you struggle with this, why is it so hard to say no? And if you're listening, and you don't struggle to say no and setting boundaries is just as easy as saying yes, when you listen to this episode you're going to get insight into why some of your peers, colleagues, friends struggle with this thing that is so easy for you.

For those of you who do struggle, what makes it so hard? To understand what makes it so hard, let's talk about some of the fears and concerns that often make saying no feel impossible. Now, quick side note, some of you listening may have no idea why you always say yes and why you rarely say no. This could be so automatic that you're just not sure.

You might even think it's just in your nature to take care of others, to volunteer, to say yes, because you know you just genuinely love being involved and engaged and helpful. You might just think this is just part of your personality. It would be antithetical to not say yes all the time.

And for you, I invite you to just be open to finding out more about why it's so automatic. And the way you do this is you can imagine saying no where you would ordinarily say yes and see what it is that's uncomfortable about that.

Here is what I anticipate you might find. First off, one of the biggest reasons that you might struggle saying no is how you think that the "no" will be perceived by others. We worry what other people will think or feel about us

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saying no. Or more specifically, that other people will interpret our no negatively and have negative feelings.

In other words, “I can't say no because they're going to be disappointed or upset. I can't say no because that will irritate them.” You might imagine people thinking that you're not a team player, that you don't care about them, that you don't care about the project, the work, the students, the clients, the patients.

Say you say no to volunteering at your kid's school. Then you worry what other parents might think, what the teacher might think. That they think that maybe you don't care about your kids or that you're selfish. You might worry that your kids will be disappointed.

Another reason that saying no might be hard for you is that you might worry about the impact it could have on future relationships and future opportunities. This would look like maybe you found yourself saying yes because you're worried that if you say no, people won't want to help you in the future.

Or maybe you've imagined that if you say no, now this opportunity that came into your awareness will disappear for forever and you'll never get a chance to do the thing that you were approached about, or it's going to be awkward the next time you interact. Can you relate to this? You say yes, because you don't want it to be weird.

Now there's a special category under struggling to say no, because of perception from others or worry about future relationships, and this special category is worrying about being liked. It might sound silly to say yes because you are worried that people won't like you. It might even sound childish to worry about this.

But one of the most salient reasons that high achieving professional people cite for saying yes, when they would rather say no, is worrying that people will not like them. Now, this is not something that might be really top of mind, but it is something that once you dig down deep at the core, risking

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likeability can feel really unsafe and can drive people to say yes when they would really like to say no.

Risking likeability feels like a risk for exclusion, for rejection, for isolation and for not belonging. And for many people, this can be very vulnerable and therefore it's something to be avoided at all costs. It's very simple to just say yes. So if you're looking at option A, of overextending at your own expense, and option B, not belonging, being rejected and feeling vulnerable, alone and unsafe, you're going to say yes.

Now these concerns about what other people will think, what other people will feel about potential opportunities being compromised and about not being liked, these concerns are often amplified by societal messages. Messages like, "Your value comes from helping others. Your value comes from being selfless."

And always saying yes, we are bombarded with messages that imply that our worth is tied to how much we give others. Think about where in your life your sense of personal value and worth feels tightly linked to how much you give to other people.

And then add to that the patriarchal belief that women should always be nurturing and accommodating. It's no wonder that people struggle to say no. Now, patriarchal beliefs can live in either gender though; you don't have to be a woman to have the patriarchy living in your head. So even though I point this out for women, this applies to anybody.

Many of us have also been socialized to believe that saying yes is what good people do. And that saying no is reserved for people who are arrogant.

To recap, there are very, very powerful reasons that saying no can be difficult. Other people's perception, or your anticipation of other people's perception of you, judgment by others, other people feeling disappointed, the imagined compromised future opportunities, the potential for changing

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relationships, the risk of likability. All of these are barriers to saying no that are compounded by socialization.

And let's just keep this really real, these concerns are in fact valid. It is a fact when you say no, people could be disappointed. It is a fact that when you stop pleasing people, some people will not be pleased. It's a fact that some opportunities might indeed be lost. They might not be available for you. It is a fact that some people might not like you.

What's noteworthy isn't the validity of these concerns so much as what you believe about these potential outcomes, and how you want to show up in the face of these potential realities. In other words, let's say you say no and somebody is disappointed. What then? What is hard about that for you?

Often, what's hard is the imagined catastrophe that we flash in front of our mind's eye. "Oh no, they're going to hate me. They're going to tell everybody that I'm awful. I'll never get asked again. It's going to have repercussions for my job, for my kids. Oh my gosh."

Meaning, we play a very strong role in creating our own difficulty. So we say no and parts of us freak out and take us over and we lose perspective. Versus, imagine what it might look like if we said no and we had a different experience.

"Oh, you know what? I won't be surprised if these people are disappointed. You know what? I learned they actually are disappointed. I get that. I trust myself to handle other people being bummed. And you know what? If this has longer term repercussions, I trust that I'm going to handle that too. Saying no is just too important to me to change my priorities because of some fears or exaggerated worries about worst-case scenarios or because of other people being disappointed."

See the difference in those two interpretations of the same reality? What I want to do now is I want to share with you a powerful exercise that can help you to start to say no with more ease.

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But before I do that, I really want to sell you on the benefits of starting to say no more often. So here are some benefits of saying no. When you learn to say no, you free yourself from being perpetually overextended. You eliminate that feeling that you're hanging on by a thread and running on fumes.

You stop abandoning your self-care, and you get rid of the resentment that builds when you're always putting others first. Saying no allows you to prioritize what actually matters most to you. And this will give you more energy, more time, and ultimately more happiness.

Imagine a life where you are not constantly drained from over committing, where you have the time and space to focus on your own goals, and where you can be fully present for the things that actually matter to you in whatever season you're in. That's what saying no can do for you.

So how the heck do you start saying no when saying no makes your skin crawl and it is so much easier and more automatic to say yes? Well, I like to keep it really simple, because there are complex reasons why you might personally struggle to say no.

But sometimes we just need to jumpstart and have very concrete, tangible steps that we can take to start moving towards a new habit. So there are two main steps that I like to teach for starting to have more ease with saying no, and it starts with bringing awareness to your unique obstacles for why it is so hard for you.

So here's step number one: Explicitly identify your concern or fear when it comes to saying no. When you imagine saying no, what are you concerned is going to happen? What are you hoping to accomplish by saying yes? And what are you fearful that saying no will create? What do you think it will sabotage?

I'm going to ask these questions again. I want you to identify very explicitly the concern or fear that you have around saying no. So when you imagine saying no, what are you concerned could happen? What are you fearful

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that saying no will create? What might it sabotage? And what are you hoping to accomplish by saying yes?

I want you to take some time and answer these questions. So you can go back for 30 seconds and write the questions down, or go to the transcript and you can see the questions there. And take a couple of days to answer these questions. Of course, without overthinking them.

Then I want you to make this concern or fear explicitly clear to yourself by writing it down. And when you write it down, you are bringing this very implicit fear, you're bringing it out of the shadows and into the light so that you can have more awareness of what might be driving a habit you don't like; people pleasing by saying yes at your own expense.

So let me give you an example. Maybe you're worried that if you say no to a work project that your colleagues or your boss or the project lead is going to think that you are not committed.

Then you can take it a layer deeper. If they think you're not committed, that might mean that they don't give you opportunities in the future. And if they don't give you opportunities in the future, you might eventually lose your job and be picked by somebody who does say yes all the time.

And if that happened, you might not be able to work in a place that you love as much as this one. And if that happened, you would feel like you'd lost your purpose in life.

Whatever it is that you are worried about or fearful of, just name it. Put it to words and see if you can get behind each fear you notice, to what's at the core.

"I'm afraid if I say no it will lead to judgment by my kid's teacher, and that judgment will have a bad effect on my kid, and then we will have stress at home. I'm concerned my friend won't like me and I'll lose the friendship." Articulate these fears so you bring them into the light, so you can start to see them for what they are.

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Which is, oftentimes, a very exaggerated or distorted worry about a worst-case scenario. Or they are a concern that you recognize as a very familiar refrain that you have in multiple areas of your life. By articulating the key concerns or fears about saying no, you can identify the common sequence that leads you to saying yes.

So this sounds like, “Oh I say yes to avoid potential disappointment, to avoid disconnection, to avoid feeling like I've lost my purpose, to avoid rejection.” Now, that's step one, and you could just stop right there. Just bringing awareness to what makes it hard to say no can be enough for you to relax into starting to say no.

I can't tell you how many clients I've had who've said, “As soon as I understood why I'm perpetually or automatically saying yes, and I realized what it was related to, I was able to just be more clear and strategic about saying yes on purpose and saying no on purpose for reasons I like.”

Now if you want to take the next step, which I think is perhaps one of the most effective ways to have ease in saying no, step two is to get really clear and know what matters most to you right now.

The reason why I put the qualifier of “right now” there is that what matters most to you might change throughout your life. You might have a particular phase in your life where you're really focused on maybe improving your 10k time. Or a phase in your life where you are really focused on your kids. Or a phase in your life where you are really focused on something specific in your career.

Or a phase in your life where you are really focused on connecting with perhaps some of the relatives you haven't ever connected with. Different phases or different seasons in our life can have different priorities. They can be fluid.

So what matters most to you in this particular season of your life? Is it sleep? Family? A particular professional project at work? If so, maybe volunteering at your kid's school is not as important right now. Is it training

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for a marathon or qualifying for Kona? Is it building your side gig to be a business owner? If so, picking up extra hospital shifts, or participating on certain committees at work, are not going to be helpful and will leave you exhausted. It just might not be the best choice right now.

Are you in a season where your number one goal is to get healthy after an injury or a surgery? If so, that might mean you choose to do different things, and choose to say no to certain things that in the past you might've loved saying yes to.

Whatever your priorities are, when you are really clear about them, it becomes easier to say no to things that while reasonable, fun, or even beneficial in other seasons, they do not currently align with what matters most to you right now.

Now I would be disingenuous if I didn't point out that it is not always easy to say no to things that are good, and say no to things that you would actually like to say yes to, that you actually see some real benefit to. But let me assure you, it is not as hard as living a life where you have said yes to everything at your own expense.

So once you are clear on what makes it very hard for you to say no, and clear on what your priorities in this season of your life are, you are ready to start saying no with more confidence. And one of the things that I find so helpful when you're trying on a new skill is actually having some specific nitty-gritty tips that help you do just that.

First you bring in the awareness and get clear on what matters most. And then here are some tips for saying no. The number one thing that I teach people when they are trying to unpack their people pleasing and unpack perpetually doing things at their own expense is to buy time.

So if you are wanting to say no, start buying time. If your default is an automatic yes, the first thing you need to do when somebody asks you if you can do something, or they ask if you're available to do something, is do not allow yourself to answer right away.

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Say something like, “Let me check my schedule and get back to you tomorrow. I would love to say yes right now, but let me check and make sure I’m not committed to something else. You know what? I think that sounds great, but I’m not 100% sure. Let me talk to...” my partner, my kid, my husband, my wife, my mom, whoever you need to talk to.

You can make it up. It doesn’t matter. “I would love to talk about this right now, but I have to go to the bathroom.” Do anything that you can possibly do to buy yourself some time between the ask and your automatic yes.

Buying time gives you space to really think deliberately about whether this is something you actually want to commit to, as opposed to just a knee-jerk yes that perpetually leads to over commitment. So buy yourself some time. Now the next sort of concept that I want to introduce you to is what I call “KTN”. KTN is not your “known traveler number”. KTN is not an abbreviation for kitchen. KTN means Kindness, Truth, and No. It’s one of my favorite tools for saying no. When you’re going to say no, you pair your no with kindness and truth.

For example, you might say, “I would love to help, but I can’t right now.” That is kindness. That is the truth. And that is still saying no. Or, “That’s a really great idea, but unfortunately it’s just not something that fits in my schedule at this moment.”

The reason I mention kindness and truth in this is that you can be fake and ingenuine and say, “Oh, that sounds great. I would really love to,” but deep down you really would not love to do it. And that might feel really inauthentic. It might come across like you’re fibbing and that just may not sit well with you.

So I think the best, cleanest way to say no is to kindly and truthfully say no. If you wouldn’t actually love to help, you don’t have to say, “You’d love to help.” You can say, “That would be a great idea. It’s just not something that works for me.” Then you’re being true to your opinion, and you’re not

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fibbing or lying or overcorrecting out of the discomfort of saying no. You're just being genuine and honest.

The beauty of KTN... kindness, truth, and no... is it allows you to say no while still being true to yourself and still being kind. It helps you set boundaries without feeling guilty or harsh. So number one, buy time. Number two, use KTN: kindness, truth, and no.

And then here are some miscellaneous examples. I think having miscellaneous examples for actual ways you can speak a no gives you ease with saying no. Because it almost gives you a little bit of a script. And when you have a script, you can try something out when you're not 100% sure. And you can start seeing that things actually work out.

So here are some brilliant examples of how you can say no. "I am flattered that you would ask, but I can't. I'm not available to do it. But you know who would be great to help you out with this? Let me get you their contact information. I am committed to something else already, so I appreciate your understanding. That's not going to work for my schedule at this time, but if something opens up, I can let you know. If I could wave a magic wand and be in two places at once, I absolutely would."

I encourage you to find ways to say no that work for you. What works for me and what works for other people may not work for you and your system. So experiment and try and find your own.

Now we have to talk about the aftermath of saying no. So if this is a new skill for you, and you're going to practice it out and you're going to try something new, I guarantee you after you say no, whether it is five minutes later, five hours later, or the next day, you might find yourself reeling in second guessing.

"Oh no, I should have said yes. I should have offered to do more. Other people would have said yes. What are they going to think about me? What if we have to work together? What if things are awkward? Oh my gosh, they're going to hate me."

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Your first job is to anticipate that the aftermath of a “no” might be difficult. Just anticipate this is going to happen. This is your second guessing, people-pleasing, chicken little part that has come to the control panel to show you all the catastrophes that might befall you because of saying no.

This is just part of the process of getting comfortable with saying no. And when this happens, plan on doing this: Remind yourself no is a critical way for you to say yes to what actually matters. So saying no to things that don't matter as much helps you say yes to what actually matters, and reminds yourself that people pleasing is deeply ingrained.

So of course you're going to second guess. This does not mean that anything has gone wrong. It is just part of the process of unravelling the tangle that is saying yes at your own expense. And then visualize the top most important things, those top priorities, the things that actually matter in the season.

I want you to picture each of them and then remind yourself, “I am saying yes to these.” And you can picture, “I'm saying yes to that. I'm saying yes to that. I'm saying yes to that. I'm saying yes to my family. I'm saying yes to my marathon training. I'm saying yes to my side gig. I'm saying yes to my kids. I'm saying yes to time with my sister. I'm saying yes to these. This is what it looks like to say yes to these.”

So what do you think? Are you ready to start saying no more often? Saying no can be hard, so if it's hard for you, you are not alone. And it's hard for a variety of individual and societal cultural reasons. But when you identify the fears and concerns that are holding you back from saying no more regularly, and you also get clear on what really matters to you most in your life right now, it becomes so much easier.

The way I think about it, there are two steps to help you learn to say no. And that is first to identify what's in the way. What holds you back? And then get clear on what matters most. Once you do that, you can buy time when people ask you to do things. You can use the KTN framework...

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kindness, truth, and pair that with a no... and this will help you say no more confidently and reduce the guilt.

So your challenge this week is to practice these ideas. The next time that you're asked to do something that doesn't align with your current priorities, buy yourself some time. Use KTN and say no with kindness and truth. And remember, saying no, it's not about being selfish. It's simply about being clear and honoring your own needs and priorities so that you can live on purpose and show up for the things that actually matter intentionally.

Thank you so much for listening to this episode. I hope you found it useful. And if you have any questions or you want to share your experience with saying no, I would love to hear from you. The way we can connect is you can join the email list at HabitsOnPurpose.com and just press "Reply" to any email.

Until next time, I will 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.