

Ep #217 : Starting Tasks That Feel Overwhelming with Project Low-Hanging Fruit



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Today's episode is about a tool to help you get out of paralysis and into action. And I lovingly call it "Project Low-Hanging Fruit." 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. If you are a new listener, I just want to take a second and welcome you to the podcast. I hope you can hear that I have a big smile on my face as I'm imagining you, as a new listener, to the podcast.

The podcast, in general, is here to give you a framework to understand yourself, and hopefully help you feel seen and heard when you're thinking about your habits. And it's also here to give you really practical, tangible concepts and tools, that you can self-administer, so that you can notice real change in real life. So that is what this is all about.

I'm so happy to have you here. I hope that I can be the voice in your ear on Wednesdays or Thursdays or Fridays, or whenever you listen to podcasts. And that if you hear something, you have a question about that, you feel free to reach out and ask me about it.

If you're not on the email list, I want to just take a second to say, go get on the email list. You go to HabitsOnPurpose.com, you'll see a little box, and you can join the email newsletter. And that's the way that we can correspond.

For my long-term listeners, you know I love you so much. I'm so glad you're here today.

I'm going to talk about a simple but powerful technique that will get you moving on tasks that feel overwhelming. Now, notice I said tasks that feel overwhelming, not tasks that are overwhelming. And I didn't say big tasks or small tasks, because it doesn't really matter the size, the scope, the

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complexity of an item on your list or of a task that you would like to accomplish.

You can feel overwhelmed in the face of something so small as standing up, and something so big as completing a dissertation to graduate with your master's or PhD. So this is a powerful technique to get you moving on tasks that feel overwhelming.

So if you are good at overthinking, and if you tend to try to think your way out of problems, like maybe I do, and if you get stuck in analysis paralysis, in the minutia of execution... if you think you need to know the “how” before you take the first step...

If you are overwhelmed in the face of an insanely big to-do list, or overwhelmed in the face of a task that you know is not actually that big of a deal, you will know that sometimes it is impossible to be able to think your way into action. In fact, you may be able to think your way into inaction.

So this episode is a plug for you to put an essential tool in your toolbox. And it is one of my essentials for getting unstuck. If you have ever found yourself paralyzed with the enormity of a task or a goal, regardless of how objectively small or objectively big it is, feeling overwhelmed and not knowing where to start, this episode is for you.

This is Project Low-Hanging Fruit. This phrase, “low-hanging fruit,” was inspired by an offhand comment I heard from Alexis Haselberger. She was being interviewed, and she was talking about breaking things down into very small pieces.

Alexis Haselberger, if you don't know her, she's a time management and productivity coach. And she said, “I'm trying to turn everything into low-hanging fruit.” That's the phrase: Project Low-Hanging Fruit.

So as you have gathered, Project Low-Hanging Fruit is where you make your tasks and your goals so accessible and so easy and so small that you are untethered from the straitjacket of overthinking and you remove the

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inertia and the barriers to starting a task. Low-hanging fruit is just within reach; it takes very little effort to obtain.

And that's exactly the point of the strategy. Make your tasks into the low-hanging fruit, so that they are easy to start and easy to keep going with.

Now, you know I like to tell you what to expect. So first, I'm going to flesh out the practical steps that you can use. Then I'm going to talk about why this technique works so well. And then touch on how to apply it in different areas of your life, whether it's at work, whether it's even softening your pattern of self-criticism.

First, let's talk about why breaking things down works so well. If you are like many of my clients, and if you are like me, you have had this experience. You look at a big project, a complex task or goal, and it feels enormous. You get a heavy feeling, and you cannot fathom where to begin.

Or perhaps you have something that's less charged, like you have some laundry to fold. Or maybe you have something really tedious and boring, like tidying or taxes, and you freeze, not knowing where to start. You feel a bit overwhelmed, or you're simply just uninterested.

You might start overthinking. You might start daydreaming. You might start looking for something else to do that is anything but this. All this leads to procrastination, or avoidance altogether. You look back and you've taken no action. This might happen for a day. This might happen for a month. This might be that project you wanted to start working on last year.

If this is you, you are not alone in this experience. This is the overthinker's hell. As David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done* says, you can do anything, but not everything.

When we are faced with a large or a vague or a tedious, boring task, it can feel like our brain goes into panic mode. Because to our brain, the task might be too much. So Project Low-Hanging Fruit is breaking tasks into minuscule, small steps to reduce this paralysis, and essentially show your

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brain, and show your system and all of your parts, that starting is easier than you think.

Here's the key: You start by committing to breaking your tasks down into tiny steps. Let me give you an example. Let's say your goal is to declutter your entire house. Or maybe it's like me, to declutter the west side of our garage. The thought of doing this is a bit exhausting, a bit overwhelming, a bit intimidating.

The way you deploy Project Low-Hanging Fruit is you initially start by breaking your project down into steps, like declutter one drawer in the kitchen, then declutter one small section of closet, then sort through one box in the garage.

Now, if this kind of breakdown makes the steps feel palatable, and the intimidation and the overwhelm and the paralysis just melts away, that's where you start. You're done. You have broken things down into smaller, manageable spots that no longer feel onerous.

But usually, it's much more effective to continue to break down your first pass at making things small into even smaller steps. So here's what this would sound like. We're going to take 'just declutter one drawer in the kitchen' and make it much smaller. Declutter one drawer in the kitchen becomes 'pick one drawer.'

Play your favorite Beastie Boys song. Take everything out of the drawer. Vacuum the drawer. Stop for a break when the song ends. Pick a new song. Put back the items to keep.

By making the first step smaller, it makes it easier to start. The drawer feels more manageable than the house. Picking a drawer and a song are more manageable than doing the whole drawer. And your aim is to keep things manageable so you avoid overwhelm. Leo Babauta, the author of *Zen Habit* says, make it so easy you can't say no. And that's what we're aiming for here.

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Now, there are going to be moments during your day, and time during your week, where the second pass at making things small is not sufficient; things are not small enough. So here's what it might look like to take the last example and make things even smaller. Stand up. Walk to the kitchen. Open any drawer. Take three items out. Sometimes the smaller, the better, because it shows your system this is doable.

And the implicit message baked into this action is “I can do this. I am capable. This is easier than I thought. No problem.”

So I want you to take a minute and think about something that you dread doing. Think about something that there's always a bit of inertia to overcome. Or some bigger tasks that you've really struggled with getting going on; it seems like it's just too much, it's too difficult, there's no time, there's no way to do it... You know you could do it, but there's something blocking you.

Put that in the back of your mind as the thing that you are going to consider, how you can shrink down into teeny, teeny, tiny, little, itty-bitty baby steps.

Now I want to add a few more things that are going to give you some extra ways to make tiny steps work even better. So my first tip to make extra steps work even better is to generate a sense of urgency on purpose. Notice I'm saying “urgency on purpose.”

This is different from having that anxious panic rush that you get when you're really running late and things are urgent because there's really not enough time and you're freaking out. That's the urgency on accident. Or that's urgency that happened because of some circumstances and you're just stuck dealing with them.

What I'm talking about here is to deliberately generate a sense of urgency. And you can do this by a very silly-sounding but powerful approach of setting a countdown for yourself. I love just counting down from three: Three, two, one, go. And then I just pick the first step and do it.

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That might simply be something like, “All right, Kristi, you need to stand up and go to the kitchen and pick a drawer.” And I hear my brain say, “I don't want to. I don't want to go to the kitchen and pick a drawer. It's too much. It's going to be so much. I'd rather do this...” And I just say, “Okay, listen, three, two, one,” and then I stand up.

What this does, is it takes the overthinking away and you start by starting.

That phrase “start by starting” is very well known, and it's attributed to Leo Babauta, the author I mentioned a minute ago who does the blog “Zen Habits”. And he uses this phrase to encourage people to overcome procrastination and perfectionism by simply taking the first step, rather than overthinking or waiting for the perfect moment.

So the counting down idea harks to Mel Robbins and her famous 5 Second Rule. This is where she explains you can trick your brain into action by counting down and then starting. What this does, is it takes you out of overthinking and moves you into action.

Now, let's bring in a little bit of Internal Family Systems here. When we find ourselves in a bit of a functional freeze state, where we're overwhelmed, we're not taking action, maybe we're overthinking or overanalyzing, over-complicating, this is an example of where we are mostly blended with a Protector part that likes to overthink, likes to wait for the perfect moment, and finds taking action, if we don't know the whole story, to be a bit risky and unsafe. So it keeps us in that thinking.

And a countdown is a great way to separate from this part, so that you get a little space from that part of you that's present. It's kind of like a splash of cold water. This part can step aside, momentarily, and we can get into action and we can show this part, “See? It's not so bad.”

Another way to create urgency is to set a specific time for yourself, “By nine o'clock, I'm going to stand up from my desk and I'm going to walk to the kitchen and open that drawer, no matter what.” You can add some nice little swear words in there if that gets you going.

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This gives your brain a concrete deadline to get moving, but it also keeps it really simple. It's not like, "At nine o'clock, I'm going to start organizing the whole house." Then nine o'clock is going to come and I'm going to go make a cup of coffee. But by nine o'clock, if my job is to stand up and walk to the kitchen, that's pretty doable.

Another tip for fueling yourself into action for taking a teeny, tiny step is to tap into your competitive side. I know a lot of you listening here know what I'm talking about. When you know that there's a part of you that really, really loves to compete, that really, really wants to win, or really, really wants to battle.

Even if you're battling for fourth place, you really, really want to compete and see what you're made of. If you can tap into your competitive side, you almost bring a sense of urgency, but it's playful fun. So this is like imagining that it's a race to get those first two things done. Or imagining that maybe somebody you're trying to surprise with a clean kitchen drawer is about to show up in your house, and you need to tidy up really quickly so they don't see what you're doing, so they are surprised.

Or you imagine you're on a reality TV show and you're trying to complete something before the buzzer goes off. Do whatever silly, zany thing you need to do to invoke the part of you that thrives when there's a good battle or race or competition to help fuel you to take those first steps.

Now, let's talk about the how and the why. Why does this work? You might be thinking, "Kristi, this is so simple. It is too basic." And I get it. I hear you. I used to roll my eyes and brush off any technique that sounded too good to be true, or trendy or overly simplistic. It can't possibly work, right?

Well, this is exactly the trap that high achievers and overthinkers fall into. We write off simple solutions because they seem too elementary to be effective. Let me explain why this works and why, although it is simple, it is effective.

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Number one: It reduces overwhelm. Your brain doesn't get flooded by the enormity of a task when it's broken down into really, really bite-sized steps. This lowers resistance.

Number two: There's less resistance. The smaller the step, the less resistance you feel towards starting. And it's easier to tell yourself, "I can handle just one drawer. I'll respond to just one email."

The third reason it works is: When you move and engage your body, it can reduce the chattery, thinking part of you that wants to keep you still, not moving, and in your head, or keep you moving but not towards anything productive.

Number four: It builds momentum. Once you start, it's easier to keep going. Starting is so much harder than continuing. One small step leads to another. And before you know it, you actually make significant progress.

Now, how and where can you apply this Project Low-Hanging Fruit in your life? You can apply it in nearly every area of your life. Perhaps the most obvious are projects: work projects, home projects, anything.

Break down your next project into tiny tasks. It might sound like, "I will start with 10 minutes of research. I will outline one-third of one section. I will reply to one email."

You could apply this to working out. Make the first step super easy. "I will go put my shoes in the foyer. I will put my shoes on, lace them up, turn on a podcast, and walk down the driveway." So much simpler than, "I've got to go run 30 minutes, and I better do that five times this week."

You could apply this for getting out of bed when a part of you wants to press snooze and another part's like, "Let's go to the gym. So instead of, "Oh, I have so much to do today. I don't want to," you say, "I'm going to sit up. I'm going to grab my phone off the bedside table, and I'll walk to the kitchen and make coffee."

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Now, say you want to apply this to unravel, maybe, a deeper pattern. Let's talk about the habit of self-criticism. So maybe you know you have a strong tendency to beat yourself up. You're really mean to yourself, make yourself wrong, and basically just listen to this inner critic.

And maybe you want to be more compassionate, but it seems like way too much to tackle. Like when you think about it, and you pay attention, you hear your brain saying things like, "Maybe I should buy that new self-compassion workbook. I wonder when I could do that. Oh, that's going to take too long. I wonder if I should do this with a friend."

"I've just been so hard on myself for so many years, there's probably no way that this is going to work. Should I journal about this? Well, maybe there's a class or a podcast that will help, but I don't really have any time because I got out of bed late, and now I'm running behind. I should go to the gym because I promised to meet so-and-so there. I don't even know where to start."

If this is what comes up for you when you think about a deeper pattern, no wonder you don't get started. So use Project Low-Hanging Fruit here. Pick one thing, anything that might be helpful. It could sound like, "I'm going to pay attention to my critical thoughts on my drive to work." I will say out loud, "I see you brain," and that's it. Or I will write down one kind comment on a sticky note and place it on my computer. And I will look at it every time.

Those are simple, doable things that can get you going if you're looking at a deeper, more ingrained habit.

Now I want to add in two miscellaneous tips here. The inspiration for Project Low-Hanging Fruit's phrase is Alexis Haselberger, who I mentioned earlier. And Alexis taught me to talk out loud to myself.

Her reason for why this works for helping you focus, is that you can feel like you have tons of thoughts going on all the time in your head. And that's most likely because our thoughts are so quick. That our lived experiences,

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there are just so many going on at once. But your mouth, it can only say one word at a time.

So once you've broken something down into very small steps, talk to yourself about these steps. It sounds like this, "I'm going to walk into the kitchen and I'm going to pick one drawer. Then I'm going to pick a Beastie Boys song and listen to it." By talking to yourself, you articulate your plan of action. You're able to listen to that singular process that you have articulated.

And this serves to interrupt if you have a swirl of thoughts and feelings going on that keep you immobilized. So try talking to yourself, if when you have the simple thing, you notice there's still a bit of inertia.

The next helpful miscellaneous tip is that if you really like having a 10,000-foot view, or you want to tap into your visionary skills and think about the big picture, don't just avoid doing this. Allow yourself to do this on purpose for a finite, defined period of time. I call this "thinking big on purpose."

So thinking big on purpose is very different than just getting lost in the minutia, getting lost in the big picture. When we're thinking about every single facet of something that needs to happen, it can oftentimes lead to overwhelm, procrastination, and avoidance.

In contrast, thinking big on purpose is deliberately deciding that you are going to think about the big picture, or you're going to think about a variety of the details and how they fit together.

You're going to think about the overall task, and you are going to do that for a defined period of time. Defining a period of time, like setting a timer for 15 or 20 minutes, reduces the chances of getting overwhelmed. So that you sit down for 15 or 20 minutes, you brainstorm, you think about the big picture, and when your time is up, you identify two small steps that you can take.

All right, so here is your challenge for the week, your invitation for the week. I want you to try this out. Take a task you've been putting off, take

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something that is kind of difficult for you to do... it doesn't matter if it's big, if it's small. If you have something that brings in overwhelm and leads to inaction, I want you to break it down into teeny, tiny, itty-bitty steps, and then start with the first, easiest step.

I think you're going to be surprised at how much progress you make when these steps actually feel achievable.

Thank you so much for tuning in. I hope you found all these tips really helpful. And if you have questions, if you want to share, if you want to let me know what it was like for you to go from lots of overwhelm to very small, concrete steps, you can join the email list. Go to HabitsOnPurpose.com and simply sign up for the list, and when you get an email, just press "reply."

Until next week, 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.