

Ep # 9: Making Decisions Ahead of Time



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

Ep # 9: Making Decisions Ahead of Time

Welcome to episode 9, making decisions ahead of time. In this episode I'll teach you the how and why of making decisions ahead of time and discuss the learning that happens behind the scenes of this simple tool.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, a podcast for high-achieving women who want to create lifelong habits and feel as good on the inside as they look on paper. You'll get practical strategies for mindset shifts that will help you finally understand the root causes of why you think, feel, and act as you do so you can learn to create habits that give more than they take, and now, here's your host physician and certified life coach Kristi Angevine.

Hello, everyone. It is so good to be here with you. Now, the first episode of the podcast started out with lots of snow falling and snowplows in the background. And now outside my window there is no snow, there's lots of sun, and lots of chirping birds that you might hear.

And if you don't know, weather here where I live is not similar to Portland, Oregon. Many people hear the word Oregon, and they automatically think green and rainy. And indeed, it is like that west of the Cascades. In Portland, west of the Cascades, they get about 40 inches, give or take, of rain spread out over about 150 days a year.

Which is really comparable to the precipitation that we had when I lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Which reportedly gets about 50 inches of rain. But in Chattanooga, the precipitation happens over about 100 days. So it's more isolated rainy days and storms than Portland's chronic drizzle.

But where I live, east of the Cascades, it is very dry, it's pretty sunny, and we get about 12 inches of rain and about 20 inches of snow over about 70 days. And the big difference compared to Tennessee is the temperatures can be about 20 to 30 degrees lower in the mornings and in the evenings.

So, as I speak, it's about 42 degrees outside and we'll be up to about 63 later in the day. And this has made dressing for things like outdoor adventures and biking, a really big learning curve.

And what I'm going to talk about today addresses a different kind of learning curve. This learning curve pertains to doing what you say you'll do.

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Imagine if you did what you plan to do 10% of the time. Now imagine if that number were closer to 75%. Imagine what would be possible if 100% of the time you did what you planned to do.

When it comes to habits, what I'll teach you today will help you get yourself closer to that 100% range. Today, I'm going to talk about making decisions ahead of time and teach you why and how to do it. It's a very simple tool, but the impact of it can be profound.

Before we dive in, I want to say thank you so much for listening. And thank you so much for sharing the podcast with people who you think would benefit from it. It has been so touching to read the reviews, and as of the day this is being recorded the podcast is a little over six weeks old and there are about 6,300 downloads, 185 ratings, and well over 100 reviews.

And I want to give a little shout out to Dr. Una, author of *EntreMD* and host of *Doctors Changing Medicine*, and *The EntreMD Podcast*. She recently had me on her *Doctors Changing Medicine* podcast to discuss the success of the launch of this podcast and it was a really fun conversation. So if you love behind the scenes discussions and have an interest in entrepreneurship, even if you aren't a physician, you should totally go check her out. And she'll be linked in the show notes.

So now, the old me would see the success of this podcast as a total fluke, and that it's not going to last. And I would discount it, I would minimize it, and I would talk and think in a really self-deprecating way about it. But I've done a lot of work on this habit of discounting things that are going really well. And I must say, I'm really proud of myself for basking in the success of the podcast launch instead of discounting it. And savoring this accomplishment has been really fun.

A major part of the fun comes from the reason why I wanted to start this podcast in the first place. I started it to help people better understand why they do what they do, and teach them how to make real change in real life. To essentially go from passively consuming these really intriguing personal development ideas, to applying them in reality.

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So every rating, every review, every download, to me, represents one person who can feel less stuck. And the ripple effect of all of us collectively understanding ourselves better and living from a place of true agency can impact our family, our community, and the world.

Now, a recent reviewer that really drives this point home said, “This podcast has helped me begin to live again. So amazing.” So thank you so much for listening. And thank you, for those of you who have connected through the email list, or in the Habits On Purpose Facebook group. If we aren't already connected on Instagram, you can come find me on Instagram, it's Kristi, K-R-I-S-T-I, period, Angevine, A-N-G-E-V-I-N-E. And on Facebook it's just habits on purpose the group.

So to hear more about how to apply what you learn on the podcast, or to hear when I have openings for private clients, or open enrollment for my small group programs, you're going to want to join my email list. And you can do this on the show notes page, there's a form you can fill out. Or simply at habitsonpurpose.com.

So with all that said, let's dive into the topic of today, decisions ahead of time. There are a couple layers to this work, there's why to make decisions ahead of time, then there's the technical aspect of how to make decisions ahead of time, and then there's the deeper learning that occurs as a result of taking this work on.

So first, I'm going to define decisions ahead of time and I'm going to distinguish it from plans ahead of time. Then I'll teach you why to do it and how to do it. Finally, I'll cover the interesting deeper work and learning that's available. And I'll end with how to implement this tool this week.

As you listen, I want you to bring to mind one or two things that you have struggled to change in the past. Think of maybe a habit you have that you really want to change. Maybe it's your phone use, maybe it's procrastination, maybe it's repetitively getting irritated with your children, or your co-workers, or your partner. It could be emotional eating, sticking to a schedule, going to bed, exercising.

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Whatever it is, just bring this to mind and consider what would be different if you employed decisions ahead of time for this habit that you want to change. Now one of the most common ways humans address change is with willpower or enthusiasm.

Now the problem with either of these is so often regardless of good intentions, regardless of your reasons why the change is important, both willpower and this early enthusiastic bravado, they often fade. They can be decent temporary helpers, but they aren't something that you can tap into for realistic long term sustainable change.

In other words, willpower, and enthusiasm. They can be tools in the tool chest that you use sometimes, but they're not designed for sustaining deep or long-term change. Yet, they are the very stuff that New Year's resolutions, and 90 day challenges, and yo-yo diets are made of.

So today we're going to focus on a more effective tool. That tool is called decisions ahead of time. Making decisions ahead of time is a very, very simple thing to do. Step one, decide what you will do ahead of time. Now, 24 hours works well, but it can be more time or less time. But basically, make a plan for what you will do ahead of time. Step two, anticipate and allow unanswered urges or desires to go off your plan. Step three, follow through.

Now, I'll explain all of these steps in a minute. But first, making decisions ahead of time is different from planning ahead of time. Planning ahead of time is just articulating an idea for later. But plans can change. Plans without a strategy for how to execute, they can fall through. Sometimes they never happen.

Now, the usual advice that draws on willpower would just have step one and step three. Basically, it is make a plan and stick to it no matter what. The difference here is we're going to take the time to be really realistic about what goes on when it's actually time to do the thing that your yesterday you was so stoked about doing.

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So what actually happens when the time comes, and we are faced with the thing that we said we would do? So often we just don't want to do the thing. You know how it goes, last night you told yourself you were going to get out of bed and go exercise. But when you wake up, it's cold beyond those covers, and you don't want to do it.

Or you said you'd have half a slice of cake not a whole slice. And now the half is gone, and you want more, and you think your yesterday self was ridiculous. This cake is excellent, you don't want to stop eating it. Or when it comes time to chart, or do your discharge summaries, or some other administrative task, in the moment you would way rather scroll on your phone.

The bottom line is when the time comes to do something we said we'd do, sometimes we just don't want to do it. Sometimes we really, really, really, really, really don't want to do it. What do you ordinarily do when you don't want to do something? Well, in the absence of willpower, usually we just don't do the thing. And we go off of that preset plan that our yesterday self, that was such a great idea.

And this may feel amazing in the moment, it may feel great to eat that additional piece of cake. It may feel like exactly what we deserve to take a break and not do some administrative task. But then we kick ourselves tomorrow. And this cycle can continue for a lifetime.

So the reason why making a decision ahead of time is so powerful is it helps you be realistic about what actually happens when it's time to follow through. Conventional advice says suck it up, follow through, otherwise known as willpower. But willpower is a sure sign of temporary change and not long lasting change.

So the better way to address not wanting to do something that our brilliant yesterday self planned for us to do is to incorporate this essential second step. So in between making a plan and deciding what you're going to do and actually executing that plan is step number two. Step number two is to anticipate and allow for the desire to go off of your plan.

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So let's discuss what this means and why it's so important. So what does allowing the desire actually mean? To allow it is simply to feel the feeling of wanting. So I'm going to explain exactly what this means in a moment, but it's really useful to outline what we usually do with the urge to go off of a plan.

Usually, we obey the urges. So we see a cookie, we have the urge to eat it and we eat the cookie, even if we will regret it later. Or we white knuckle our way through urges. We say things like, "I will not eat this cookie. No, no, no, I will not." Or we try to distract ourselves from the urges. Maybe we go for a walk, maybe we turn on some music, maybe we busy ourselves.

So let's talk about a viable alternative to obeying, using willpower, or distracting ourselves. The viable alternative is to allow the urge. So let's get really specific about what this means. Allowing is essentially taking the feeling of wanting, the feeling of desire, the feeling of an urge to do something, to eat something, to drink something, to not do something. And literally processing that feeling by carefully attending to the physical sensations of it in your body.

Basically, it means slowing down and feeling what the urge feels like in your body. Now, if you listen to episode seven, this will sound very familiar. What I talked about there was processing emotions and feelings. The approach for an urge is exactly the same. It's a matter of bringing your awareness away from the object or activity of desire, and bringing it into your body.

So to allow an urge has three parts and it requires you to pause and slow down business as usual. These three parts are notice it, name it, feel it. It goes like this, notice the urge. Simply notice that you're having an urge or a wanting for something.

Then name it by thinking to yourself, "This is an urge." It might sound like this is an urge to not exercise. This is the desire to grab my phone. This is the urge to pour another drink, grab more Nutella, have another thin mint, to watch one more episode when I said I would go to bed, to get really pissy and just do. This is an urge.

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Then the next step is to just feel it. Now episode seven goes into great detail about this process, but essentially when you're feeling an urge, you are shining a spotlight onto your bodily experience of wanting. What does it actually feel like in your body when you have a yearning? Is it a fast feeling? Is it a pulling? Is it a buzzing?

If you had to describe the sensations to a child by only describing the physical attributes, what would you say? Is there a temperature? Is it constant? Is it moving, radiating? How intense is it? Does it have a shape or color? Basically what is that physical feeling like?

And as you feel into the sensation you can narrate it to yourself, or you can focus on the physicality of it. Or you can simply repeat like a mantra, "This is an urge." This whole process takes some patience and a willingness to feel into what we usually don't pay attention to.

But what you'll find is that usually the sensations associated with yearning, they don't actually last that long. They may end and then resume, but generally they're brief. And when you actually slow down and feel them, they aren't actually that bad. They aren't excruciatingly intolerable. What makes them intolerable is not feeling them, otherwise known as resisting them with willpower.

In contrast to allowing, willpower looks like having an urge or a yearning and then layering on top of that physical sensation thoughts like, no, I must not give in. I won't. I shouldn't This is hard. What's wrong with me that I want this that I can't stop?" It's like there's no off switch. Thoughts like this, create the difficulty.

So there are three simple steps to allowing an urge: notice it, name it, feel it. But the more realistic process actually sounds like notice the urge, pause. Name the urge, pause. Feel the urge, pause. Narrate it, focus on the physical or use the mantra technique, and pause again. It's this interjection of pauses that really amplify the impact of the process and basically make this process the equivalent of a sports show who does a slow motion video of something.

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When I'm doing this, I like to add in kind self-talk like this, "This is just an urge. I can totally handle an urge. I've felt worse." Sometimes I actually like to remind myself something like, listen, if after three minutes or five minutes of feeling this, you still want the thing, you still want the cookie, fine, go for it. But for now let's just be here with the feeling.

And sometimes I like encouragement, like you've got this, you do hard things for a living, you can totally handle this. And when I'm talking to myself, let's just be honest, I will oftentimes add in lots of expletives for emphasis.

Now I want to go back and highlight an important part in case you missed it. Part of step two is to anticipate urges. This means that in advance, you explicitly expect urges to go off of your plan to come up. This way when they do, you're not surprised. You're not upset, you're not caught off guard. Rather you get to think, "Right on time. Urges, I knew you were coming, and I've got just the perfect thing that we can do together."

Anticipation puts you in the driver's seat. Then in advance, you can even brainstorm how you want to allow your urges. What technique works best for you? What will you actually do in the moment when an urge to go off of your plan from yesterday comes up? And in this way allowing unanswered urges, is itself a decision that you make ahead of time.

So let's review the steps for decision ahead of time. Make a plan, anticipate urges, and allow the unanswered urges, and then do the thing you said you would do. The more fleshed out version of this is make a decision, anticipate that you won't want to follow through when the time comes. Plan for not wanting to follow through, then notice the urge, pause. Name the urge, pause. Feel the urge, pause. Narrate your experience with compassion.

Now, there's a very common misuse of this tool that I want you to know about. A common misuse is to be unrealistic or rigid with it and then use it as a weapon against yourself. Meaning you make a rigid or an unrealistic plan and when you don't follow through you beat yourself up afterwards.

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For example, perhaps you decide you'll go for a 15 minute walk after work before you pick up your kids from school. But there's a hailstorm or it's really hot outside and you're in your business suit and you forgot a change of clothes. Or you're in high heels and you forgot your sneakers.

Or your average commute from your work to or you pick up your kids leaves you about five minutes of walking time. But one time you made the commute really quickly, so you incorrectly assume that you can do that every single time and you incorrectly assume that you actually have 15 minutes in which to do it.

So then when it comes time to do your walk and it doesn't work out because you don't want to walk in the hail, or you don't want to roast in your fancy clothes, or walk in high heels, or walk barefoot, or you just prefer to pick your kids up on time as opposed to walking and then being late, then you beat yourself up afterwards for not being able to stick to your 15 minute plan. So as you implement this tool this week, watch for this tendency.

So now we've talked about how and why to make a decision ahead of time. And now I want to discuss the deeper learning that's available when you do this. So on one level, the technical goal of this is to follow your plan. But underneath, the real goal of this tool is to help you develop the muscle of feeling feelings instead of resisting, numbing, or reacting to them.

It's to help you see what comes up when you don't want to do what you decided to do. It's to help you learn what thoughts create urges in the first place. It's to help you see what your usual response is to the in the moment urges to see how you talk to yourself. And it's to practice observing your own thoughts and feelings.

So first, let's talk about what creates urges anyways. Urges feel automatic because they're usually very fast and our typical experience is to feel them in the absence of language. We are kind of like Pavlov's dogs, with repetition we may have conditioned ourselves to see potato chips, or see wine, or see our phone and want those things. But in truth, the urge comes from within.

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Urges are feelings and therefore they come from things that we think. Slowing down to feel the sensations of an urge gives you access to the thoughts that create it in the first place. And there are three categories to the thoughts that drive urges, and they are the following. They are permission giving thoughts, deserving thoughts, and purely desire based thoughts. Let me give you some examples.

Permission giving thoughts sound like it's fine, one cookie won't hurt. I'll pick back up tomorrow, why not? Deserving thoughts sound like after the day I've had, I just need to wind down. I deserve a break. Pure desire thought sound like it's going to be delicious. It feels so good under the covers. I just want it. I just want to.

So even though it doesn't seem like it, urges are not solely caused by the things outside of us. It's not like we all universally walk up to a bag of cookies and instantly feel desire. That desire happens when we walk up to the bag of cookies, we see the bag of cookies and then we have a thought about those cookies.

So urges are caused by our thoughts about the things outside of us. Thoughts, which may be so lightning fast and subconscious that we don't even notice the thought, we just feel the pulling urge feeling. So what kind of thoughts create yearning for you? Are they more desire based, permission giving? Are they a mix? When you know your unique collection of thoughts, you'll start to be able to identify them so much more easily.

Now, the next deeper learning is to discover how you usually respond to your urges. Do you counter them with willpower? With resistance? Do you eventually give in? Do you usually answer or obey the urges? Or do you try to distract yourself? Do you judge yourself for having the urges at all? What's your unique habit for how you respond to having urges?

It's really important to note right here that urges are neutral pieces of information. They're not signs of a lack of character, or a lack of discipline, or evidence that you can't make a change. But it's really common as a meta habit, so to speak, to judge urges and judge yourself for their presence.

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But judging urges would be like telling a kid, “What's wrong with you for wanting another cookie? Have you no self-control?” Slowing down to feel urges reveals how you talk to yourself. And I find that how you talk to yourself when it comes to wanting something is a glimpse into how you more generally speak to yourself.

So the other piece to practicing decisions ahead of time is that in addition to developing and refining the skill of feeling your feelings, you get the chance to practice watching your own thoughts. You know how film projectors, or even better overhead projectors that teachers would use to show a worksheet that they can write on to the entire class that is projected onto a screen? Well, this is what it can be like to watch your own thoughts.

With a film projector or an overhead projector you can see the device that's projecting, and you can see the image or the words that it projects. Similarly, you can be the thinker of your thoughts, and the one watching them go by kind of like clouds in the sky or water in a stream. The pause between responding to an urge and the time you spend noticing the urge feeling in your body gives you the perfect opportunity to notice your thoughts instead of just believing them because they're there.

Now last of all, when you allow an urge you may actually notice other feelings and many other thoughts come to the surface. When we obey or resist an urge it's kind of like closing a door on these other thoughts and feelings. But to pause and allow the urge, gives access to the other elements that can't typically surface.

And these other elements are like breadcrumbs that show you what's really going on for you one, two, or three layers behind the surface level desire to not stick to a plan. And this is the precise stuff that when you do deep work on, will change you and will change your habits.

So let's summarize, making decisions ahead of time involves much more than willpower. It requires you to make a plan, anticipate urges to go off of your plan, allow and feel those desires or urges, and then follow through. Allowing urges comes down to noticing, naming, and then feeling them plus or minus narrating them.

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And in doing this, you not only learn the skill of following through with that willpower, you learn you can trust yourself to do what you say you'll do. You learn what your usual response to urges is. You learn what thoughts cause your urges, and you learn how you usually talk to yourself. And finally, you learn how to notice your thoughts like words on a screen.

So this week, to practice, pick one thing and make a decision ahead of time with that one thing every day this week. Make it realistic and challenge yourself to not be rigid, and then pick one or more of the following three things to do. Simply notice what your experience of urges is. Or notice your usual response to urges. Or notice the thoughts that create the urges themselves.

So as you do this work, you can share what you discover or any questions you have on Facebook in the Habits On Purpose Facebook group. If you want me to address something specific that you run into, or if in general separate from this topic, you have something that you want addressed on the podcast in terms of a question or a situation, all you have to do is in the show notes you'll see a link to a survey where you can fill in, anonymously if you'd like, your question or situation that you would like addressed.

I can't wait to hear what you find out as you do this process. And I will see you in the next episode.

If you like what you're hearing and think others would benefit from The Habits On Purpose podcast, I have a huge favor to ask. It would mean so much to me if you would take a few minutes to rate and review the podcast. Reviews are especially important in helping a podcast be discoverable.

And I totally understand that it's really easy to not take the time to do a review. So to give you a little incentive to help me get this podcast off to a great start, I'm going to be giving away five day designer planners and Audible gift cards to listeners who follow, rate, and review the show. Now it doesn't have to be a five star review, although I really hope you love the podcast. I want your honest feedback so I can create an awesome show that provides tons of value.

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So for all the details about how you can win, visit habitsonpurpose.com/podcastlaunch. And I'll be announcing the winners on the show in an upcoming episode. And if you know someone who you think would get value from listening and you feel called to share it with them, I would be so very grateful.

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.