

Ep #69: How to Stop Striving and Start Thriving with Dr. Dawn Baker



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Kristi Angevine

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Welcome to Episode #69. This is your host, Kristi Angevine. Have you ever felt like you're running yourself ragged on a treadmill of achievement? Or felt a tug to do something a little bit different in your life but maybe didn't have a clue how to do it, or what it might even look like?

My guest to help me talk about these issues today is anesthesiologist Dr. Dawn Baker. Listen in today, as she and I have a conversation about the different aspects involved in figuring out for yourself how to get more clear on what matters most, so you can stop striving for accolades in order to prove you're worthy.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, a podcast for high-achieving women who want to create lifelong habits that give more than they take. 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. And now, here's your host, Physician, and Master Certified Life Coach, Kristi Angevine.

Hello, hello, everyone. So, for a while I've wanted to discuss the habit of perpetually striving, but not feeling like you're actually thriving. Now, this was my experience for decades. But honestly, it was a quiet habit that I didn't really realize I had. Now to be clear, on one hand, it was a really useful habit. Striving helped with good grades, getting into medical school, learning things from hard classes, pushing myself athletically.

But on the other hand, there was an underbelly to constantly pushing. As I went through life, constantly striving, I kind of lost sight of what I really valued most. Have you ever had the feeling that something with your professional life or your personal life is just a little off? Maybe it's actually hard to put into words? Maybe you don't even know what you would want to change, but you sense you want something different, and you sense that you're constantly striving?

Well, if you can relate to this, this conversation is perfect for you. Joining me to discuss these issues is Dr. Dawn Baker. She's a physician, author, and a lifestyle design coach who helps professionals step off this treadmill

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of achievement and find what she terms an authentic work/life balance that's right for them. So, let's get to it.

Kristi Angevine: Welcome, everybody. Please join me in my excitement for welcoming my guest today; I've got Dr. Dawn Baker. So, for people who haven't already read your book, or who aren't following you online, can you take a minute and introduce yourself?

Dawn Baker: Sure. Well, first of all, I want to say thank you so much for having me on your podcast, because I've been a fan for some period of time. I find your podcast to just be very actionable and lots of really good information. I am Dawn Baker. I am an anesthesiologist and a second career MD. I actually used to be an engineer, in the early part of my adulthood. I am now practicing locum tenens and per diem only, so that I can have a kind of a more free life that is location independent. I have one seven-year-old daughter that I homeschool. I live in multiple different locales, including an 80-acre off-grid property in the mountains of Utah.

Kristi: Oh, my goodness. Okay, so then I have to ask then, where are you calling in from today? And if you look out a window, what can you see, if you're location independent, like many of us dream about?

Dawn: Right now, I am in my RV, and I am in Cedar City, Utah, which is the nearest town to our property that I just mentioned. And when I look out the window, I see red rocks and juniper trees and lots of blooms that are happening because it's late spring. But the reason that I'm in an RV park in the most nearby town is because our property has some access issues that are related to seasonality.

We have 10 miles of road that is not plowed during the winter. And this winter, that just is ending right now, even though when we're talking it's May, it was the most historic snowfall winter in Utah. So, our property is buried under snow and the access is buried under snow. And we have had some difficulty getting back there.

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We try to live there at least half of the year. And last year, before the time that we're speaking, we actually were able to drive in there in a normal vehicle. Right now, you're not able to get into the property without using a snowmobile or some sort of tracked vehicle. We have some snow damage, so we are going in and out on our tracked vehicle and making repairs while we're waiting for the snow to melt.

Kristi: Oh, my goodness. Our family, just hearing that, we made some sort of... We don't live off grid, and we do have access to where we are. But we had some spring break trip plans that were to do some exploration of Death Valley. And then, because of road closures, because of historic weather, we modified those.

We ultimately modified our trip again and did a staycation because of historic levels of snow in Nevada. It's everywhere. So, except when you have a home that is off-grid and has access issues, it can be extra challenging, it sounds. Thank you for sharing that.

But I do have another question, sort of to ground and frame this conversation to make it quite personal, so people kind of know who you are. Is there something like a passion or a hobby or interest of yours that maybe you could just share a little bit about?

Dawn: I think that my passions have evolved over time. But an underlying thread to all of them is something that is related to outdoors movement and athleticism. I think what you're getting at is my passion for rock climbing, that is long standing. It is something that I have done off and on since I was in my early 20s, and I'm now 49.

At the early time of rock climbing, it became an obsession. It became something that my husband and I did, that informed every waking moment that was not spent studying or working. All of our trips were planned around rock climbing locales. Around going to places in other parts of the country and other parts of the world that involved rock climbing. And any goal setting was related to rock climbing, doing a harder route, getting to that next big athletic goal. I really like that.

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It also brings with it a big community that can be quite inspiring. You get a lot of lessons from doing a lifestyle sport like this. And there are other ones besides rock climbing. Things that I have tried and am interested in such as skiing, snowboarding, surfing. Some of those things also qualify as a lifestyle sport in that way.

Since I had my daughter, I have scaled back in my rock climbing. I'd say both of us decided, we made a conscious decision, that we were going to not push so hard and make every single adventure or vacation be about rock climbing. But it is still kind of in the back of our adventure lives. It is something that we do now just more to give our daughter some adventure. But that kind of outside, pushing your body, doing movement, and doing adventure, that combination, I would say, is definitely the passion.

Kristi: Oh, I love that. I think we have a lot of overlap, even though I don't climb rocks. But I do think we share some of those values. So, I'd like to hear a little bit about your story, and about how you became so passionate about self-awareness and being intentional with your life.

Dawn: Well, I started out my early adulthood which was related to rock climbing, and I was also starting a career in engineering. I realized quickly that working as an engineer pegged me to live in certain places that I didn't really want to live. And it also was less freeing, in the sense that I couldn't live anywhere I wanted to live and do my job. I couldn't necessarily take off long stretches of vacation in order to do rock climbing trips.

And so, I thought about what I might do that was something that could give me a little bit more location and schedule freedom. But also, was challenging and had that kind of science aspect, math aspect, that I loved, that I had gone into engineering for. And I found medicine. I had some friends who had worked as engineers and then gone into medicine, but I didn't have any family members that were doctors or anything like that. There wasn't any sort of lineage or legacy that I was trying to follow.

So, I started investigating medicine and I ended up going into it, knowing that if I chose the right specialty, I would have the freedom that I wanted.

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But along the way, I got lost. I ended up back in a situation that would have pegged me into the same exact kind of scenario that I was in when I was an engineer. Which was, you need to live in this certain place because you are in a niche of medicine that you can only practice in a city center and an academic type of a practice setting, for example.

It was something that I got into because I was told that I was good, and I had a natural gift, for interpreting ultrasound and interpreting echocardiography. That was the part of anesthesiology that formed this niche specialty.

And along the way, at the same time, I started having difficulties during my medical training. I had some nonspecific health symptoms that were causing me to think that I was being burned out. I was just getting older, and I was having trouble starting the family that I wanted to start. I was a little older because I had gone to medical school a little later. So, in my mid-30s, I realized that I was unable to get pregnant and sought a fertility specialist for a workup.

Well, to make a long story short, it turned out that I had a very large brain tumor, which was thought to be pituitary. It was causing a lot of different hormone imbalances that were causing all the symptoms I had. And this diagnosis was delayed by my own busyness and inability to go for the tests at the time when they were recommended to me. And so, it was a big self-care fail, and a big wake up call for me.

I ended up having to have major brain surgery at the institution where I was training. And I had my supervisors, some of my supervisors, taking care of me. And people that I had worked with in the operating room with me, where I was laying on the table as a patient. I ended up being in the Neuro-ICU with patients that I had, just a week before, taken care of myself. It was a real eye-opening and interesting and life-changing experience.

Kristi: Oh, wow, Dawn, that's really intense.

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Dawn: Yeah, it was intense. But it was also a time where, once the diagnosis was made, we went into go mode. It was like, you have to get this out as soon as possible, and so I didn't really have the ability to think too much about it. But at the same time, I was also really grateful to have an answer. Because before, it was like, what are all these things that are happening to me? I don't understand this.

Kristi: You know, that makes so much sense. So, here you are, and you have clearly, thankfully, gotten through everything with your brain tumor. And you mentioned that this was kind of a wakeup call. I'm guessing, did the wakeup call, did this happen after the dust settled, after your treatment?

Dawn: Yes and no. I was already on a path to learning more about myself, when I realized that I was having what I would call a depression, that was really like a lack of motivation. It was really an anhedonic depression. And I took some time off before I even had the diagnosis. So, I knew. I knew that I needed to take better care of myself.

I sought out lots of different modalities for getting my mental health in order. I went on a meditation retreat. I read books about mindfulness. I started sleeping more, and just practicing present-moment thinking. I sought out the help of a coach. I had a mentor in my department that was married to an executive coach, and she hooked me up with him. He asked me questions and gave me my first coaching experience. And that was very helpful, to try to think about what I wanted, just where I was in my life, and what my values were.

And so, I did do that before I had the diagnosis and the surgery and the recovery. But once I had the experience of the real, physical, problem solving, and then a convalescence and a recovery period, that gave me more reflection. That was when I decided a couple of different things.

I decided that I wanted to scale back my efforts to go down this niche specialty route in anesthesiology, and just really take it step by step and finish my training. Go into very general practice, and get my feet wet and see if I liked it.

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And then at the same time, I wanted to share with other physicians what I had learned about myself through my own process of self-discovery. I wanted to share with other people how they could try to avoid being on the operating table like I was; being in a physical crisis or a mental health crisis. That made them stop and think about things before they got to that point, basically.

Kristi: I just want to say, I think that's so good. I mean, that's basically the same reason why I do the work that I do. Is to be able to take what I now know and be able to share it, so that other people can learn it quicker than I did or differently than I did.

And in your story, which is just such a powerful one, I can hear sort of the echoes of that idea, of that treadmill of achievement that we all get on, where we're constantly going for something that may not be actually in alignment with what we really want. Can you talk a little bit about either how that showed up for you, or how you see that showing up for your clients?

Dawn: Definitely. So, I definitely feel like I was on the treadmill of achievement. Even early on in my life, probably when I was in high school. And those times when you're gunning for the good grades, and people tell you you're smart, and they reward you with more work. My first experience with that was probably even in grade school. And I talk about that in my book.

I think a lot of us who are in medicine have had experiences like that. And it becomes kind of an addicting thing. It becomes something, where in order to feel worthy and feel good about yourself, you do need to do more and more. And people ask more of you at the same time. So, you become more accustomed to more and more work and more and more responsibility. Your life just gets more complicated and more complex.

And at the same time, that can be very overwhelming. That causes the problems, that we see often with people getting burnt out. Getting to a place where they think that they maybe want a change in their career, but they're really not sure what they want to do. Or maybe a change occurs in

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their career, but then they don't know what to do with their new time that is given to them, because they make a change in their career.

So, I see a lot of clients like that. Where they've been on the treadmill and they know that they need to get off, but either they don't know how to get off, or they have an opportunity presented to them to get off but then they're scared to get off. Because they don't really know what they like. They don't really know what brings them joy anymore. They don't really know what they want to do with any free time that they might be given.

Kristi: That makes perfect sense. I feel like you're speaking so much to a lot of what I experienced, where I remember just almost getting to a point in, even in college, and then in medical school and residency. I would get to these little points where I was looking, I would think, "What do I want? Who am I? What do I like? What do I value?"

And not being able to answer it easily because I didn't really have the tools for how to do that. It was very easy to sort of look outside, and look to things that either society or family or friends sort of valued, and just sort of internalize that as my own and not even realize I was doing it.

Dawn: Absolutely. And we're all around a lot of people that, being in medicine, they're either our colleagues or they're our supervisors or senior practitioners or they are professors, or whatever it is, other students if we're in training, other trainees, that are in the same boat. And so, those are the people that you're looking at, and you're comparing yourselves to.

Kristi: Exactly. This brings me to one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. I've heard you talk about when people are looking, basically, to find some, for lack of a better word, work/life balance. Or they're looking for something to feel differently in what they're doing with their vocation and their life.

That oftentimes, they do it what we were just saying talking about, they look outside, and they look to others. And then, what you espouse is, what

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would be more effective is to look inward. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Dawn: Yes. In my steps for how you can *Lean Out*, which is the name of my book, lean away from what everyone else is doing. Go the opposite if you want to. Or at least, to figure out if you want to. Is to do deep self-inquiry. And the way that you do that, first, is you try to think about what rules you might be living by that weren't made up by you. But that are rules that are coming from either your practice setting, your culture, your family upbringing, different places.

And evaluating if those are rules that you really do want to live by. Are they rules that are true? Where do they come from? Do they come from me, or do they come from something else? And do I want to keep abiding by this rule?

And then, looking at different thought traps that you might have. Those are kind of intertwined with the rules. Having a fixed mindset. Thinking that you can only do one particular thing because you trained in that particular area, for example.

Or having guilt like, "I cannot cut back on my work because then I will have patients that are worried about getting their care, or they're going to be disappointed. Or coworkers are going to be disappointed." Sunk-cost fallacy, all-or-nothing thinking, just being confused about what your options are.

And then, figuring out who you really are. And knowing that you are a person that is completely worthy of having the kind of work/life balance that you want, just by the fact that you exist in the world. There's nothing that you can accomplish and do that makes you more worthy; you're already worthy of having what you want.

Kristi: What you just said is, I mean, that's a big thing. I don't want to derail you, but the idea that doing more, achieving more, accomplishing more,

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getting more done, doesn't change your worthiness. I think that really needs to be emphasized.

Because I think a lot of us, we don't realize that the way we're showing up is actually predicated on the idea that our worth does hinge on our actions. When really, you're saying our work is stable. It is just what it is, and nothing makes it more or less.

So, continue on. I just wanted to make sure that anybody listening didn't just let that breeze by them, because that's a really important piece here.

Dawn: That's great, that you repeated that. That's good. And throughout my book, I give exercises to try to reinforce some of these concepts. One of the ones that I have, related to what you just mentioned, to recognizing who you are and that you're worthy without your accolades and your titles and things, is thinking back to your childhood. Visualizing the child that you were, before you started winning awards and getting good grades and achieving and getting on that treadmill.

So, the next steps in leaning out are involving redefining success for you. And making sure that your success is defined not with just external means, like money, how famous you are, how many people are following you on Instagram, for example.

And then, something that I really like, and I think it comes from my background in the rock climbing and pushing my body and movement, and those things that we first started out talking about in this conversation. Is recommending to people that they practice doing hard things. Because at the heart of having confidence to do something different in your career, is being able to know that you can do something difficult.

And the difficulty can be something physical, but it can also just be something related to your mind and to asking for what you want at work. And so, I have a lot of examples about doing hard things. Like, trying something new, spending time resting, spending time in nature, spending time by yourself, learning to say no, making decisions.

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There are lots of different examples of ways that people can shore up their confidence to do the really hard things. Like, go to your practice and say, “Hey, I only want to work two days a week. And by the way, I don't want to take call anymore,” or whatever it is that you decide that you want to do.

Kristi: I absolutely love hearing that. Because I love hearing the incorporation of #1, redefining what success is, by looking within and making sure it's not just external means. The part that really struck me is this, making it an explicit practice to do hard things. And making the delineation that it's not just going and running a marathon or climbing the hardest route or something physical. But that doing hard things can be some of this internal work.

Even redefining success when you frame it as, “Well, this is a challenging thing.” To maybe, go against the grain, do something a little bit unconventional. When you know it's okay, that it's a little bit hard, and that you're going to practice doing hard things, I feel like that opens us up to being even more willing to do these things.

Dawn: Yes. And I love pointing out in my writing... I've been writing a blog for a number of years, before I even wrote this book. I love pointing out to my audience that doing something hard doesn't have to look the traditional way. Being mindful doesn't have to look the traditional way. I love just kind of blowing people's minds and opening their minds up to, well, hard can look like this or this. And it really is dependent on you, too. So, that's where that self-knowledge piece comes in. I love that kind of stuff.

Kristi: I think a lot of people who listen to this can relate to the fact that sometimes the hard things aren't the standard hard things. And I see that with my clients a lot, when they try to incorporate some more whitespace, or bring back in a hobby that they maybe haven't devoted time to lately. They sit down, they're going to read a book, and then they find themselves just having a difficult time.

They maybe haven't sat down and done nothing. Or they haven't just gone for a walk without also looking at their grocery list and listening to a

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podcast, and then calling a friend, and filling it with lots of things. So, hard things can look like just sitting down. And be something totally different than what you think of, in the most traditional sense. Thank you for bringing that up.

Dawn: Yeah, 100%. I have experienced that myself. And I have had a lot of different coaching clients that have that same problem, as well.

Kristi: So, this ties into something else that I wanted to mention, that I wanted to bring up. Is that there's a quote in your book that I think is going to be really great for everybody here. I just want to read this, and then have you, you and I, kind of discuss it a little bit. It harkens back to what you're talking about. About some of the internalized rules that we have, that we may not even know we're operating in our system.

And so, here's the quote, it says, "The feeling of guilt comes from not meeting a set standard, or not following a rule. While guilt is a very useful and important emotion when we've actually done something wrong, it muddies the waters when the deviation in question is from a completely made-up standard. You might have made it up, or it might have become fabricated by the culture."

I love this so much. Because for myself, personally, and so many of my clients, guilt can be an emotion from which they live a lot of their life. That dictates a lot of their decisions, and that drains them constantly. They don't recognize where its etiology is. And they don't connect it to some of these sort of internalized, possibly made-up standards.

Can you share a little bit more about how these rules can affect emotions, like guilt?

Dawn: Yeah, I had forgotten that I wrote that. And it brings up, just a time when I was writing this book, that I had so many different ideas. When I look back at my book, I'm so proud of it. Because I'm like, "How did I come up with that? Wow! What did I read that inspired me to write that sentence? It's so good."

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The reason is, that when we have these emotions, we bring them in to mean something that, to another person, it wouldn't necessarily mean the same thing. And it just shows how so much of the barriers that we're forming, and the problems that we have, are really made up in our own brains.

It can be guilt, like the example that you read to me from my own book, that I didn't even remember. And then also other things, like shame or feeling that if you are not the golden child... You see this person that seems to be the one that is going to win all the awards and is going to be the chief and is doing everything perfectly, you have no idea what's going on inside them. But you see that person and you think, "I have to be like them. And if I'm not like them, I'm not worthy of doing this job."

And so, many of us do that. Where we're like, "Well, if I'm not like Person X in my practice, where they are meeting the standard, exceeding the standard, seeing all of the patients, getting all of the notes done, doing the perfect revenue production. They're in the office first, they're out of the office last. If I'm not meeting that standard, then I really should just leave. I should just be out of here and do something different."

It's okay to be different than that, and still be in the practice. I like to call it "being a counter culture professional". Which is, that we can still be a professional, we can still be there for our patients, be there for our clients, do a very good job with integrity. But not meet the standard that somebody else is meeting. That, maybe, just does not work for your particular constitution. Because you are going to be overwhelmed with that level of things to do, for instance.

Kristi: I love hearing all of this, Dawn. And when I hear you talking about your journey, all the deep introspection work that you did to look at your, what sounds like, your core values. And sort of organize and set your life up so that you're basically practicing and doing medicine on your own terms, practicing life in your own way. I feel like it's just so inspirational for

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other people who are listening, and thinking, “Gosh, I would really like that. But I don't know how to do it.” So, I really appreciate you sharing all that.

Dawn: I'm happy to share it. And I really loved putting my own story into my own book. But at the same time, I know that what I do is not for everyone. Not everyone wants to live, at times, in an RV. Or live in a tiny house, like I do. And have to drive three or four hours to go do a week of work.

There are tradeoffs in any type of lifestyle that you design. And so, I wanted to also incorporate other examples into my book. There is something like seven or eight different women that are profiled in there, that are doing things that are unconventional. They're being counterculture professionals. And they're not all medicine, either, there are a couple of women from other professions. I really thought that was important too, to show people that aren't just doctors that, that they can do this.

And so yeah, I really appreciate you saying that. That was my goal, to try to show people, through inspiration and through a means to self-coach through the exercises in this book, that that they can do it. They can do something different. They can meet their dreams for the kind of lifestyle that they want.

Kristi: That's great. And I love that you emphasize that your way isn't the gold standard way. That each of us has our own way of how it's going to look. So, for somebody who's listening to this, and their interest is piqued, #1, they should go out and get the book *Lean Out*. Is there is something that would be an actionable thing somebody could do?

Whether it's reflection, or something that they could do this week, in their week, and just maybe check in to see, either where things might be out of balance, or to do something where they get like an uplifting sense of encouragement for 'okay, a change is possible'. Is there anything that you might recommend that they do?

Dawn: Yeah, there are a couple of things that would be very easy and are free for people to do and won't take very much time. As you mentioned,

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you could go buy my book, and there are lots of different exercises in there. But if you go to my website, it's called PracticeBalance.com, you can opt in to my newsletter and receive one of the exercises that is included in the book. It is a very simple, and yet very powerful, exercise to learn about what your core values are.

And that should be the thing that can then inform any subsequent decisions that you might want to make about making a change at work, or even just changing around what you do in your time when you're not at work, what you're spending your time on. Are you spending your time doing things that are in line with your values? Or are they completely incongruent with your values? So, that's one.

And then the other one, to gain inspiration you can go and download episodes of my podcast; it's also called *Lean Out*. They're quick because they're all about 20 - 30 minutes in length. And like your podcast, bite-sized pieces of information. But mine are conversations with other women who have taken the path to lean out and do something different.

Kristi: That is so, so great. We will make sure that we have PracticeBalance.com and *Lean Out* resources all linked in the show notes. So, everybody who's listening, go to PracticeBalance.com; you can go get that exercise there. Then if you want more, you can listen to the podcast and get Dawn's book. Dawn, is there anything we've missed, that maybe that you want to add in? Or does this feel complete?

Dawn: I think we've talked about most of the things, the big messages, that I like to give to people. Except that the one thing that we didn't really mention is that people need to give themselves permission. I know you have talked about this before, but oftentimes, women want to make a change, they know that they need to, but they're waiting. They're waiting for permission. And the permission needs to come within yourself. You need to give yourself permission to do whatever it is that you're dreaming about.

Kristi: That's so good. So, everyone listening who wants that permission, for right at this moment, you can lean on Dawn and I saying, you have

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permission. And you can practice giving it to yourself from within. I love that reminder. Thank you so much for saying that.

And thank you for coming on the podcast. Our paths have sort of crossed here and there on line, as the way it is on Facebook and social media. And so, I've learned from you there. But we've never met in real life, even though we do share a lot of similar values with travel and adventure.

So, thank you for making the time today and for making this work when you're not connected to traditional hardline internet. Which might be a deal-breaker for some people, but obviously not for you. I just really appreciate your time. Thank you for sharing all of your wisdom. It's been great.

Dawn: Thank you so much for having me on. I really hope that we actually cross paths in real life someday, hopefully out doing an adventure somewhere.

Kristi: I think that sounds great. We should pencil that in, for sure. So, wonderful. Thank you so much.

Dawn: You're welcome.

Kristi: I hope you enjoyed this week's episode. Do you want to go from feeling stuck to feeling in the driver's seat of your life? If so, I can help. If you're listening to this, when this podcast episode comes out in real time, in mid-May 2023, enrollment for the Habits on Purpose for Physicians Small Group Coaching Program is going to be opening soon.

Habits on Purpose for Physicians, otherwise known as HOPP, is the place to be if you want to use your CME funds to stop feeling reactionary, and start being consistently intentional in your life. As one of my clients says, "HOPP is one of the most thoughtfully designed coaching programs." So, why wait to start feeling better? Check out the details and get on the waitlist at HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP.

If you're not a physician, or you're simply more interested in private coaching to help apply what you're learning on the podcast, there's an

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option for that too. You can say goodbye to second-guessing everything, and start making swift decisions without all sorts of mind drama.

You can go from counting down the minutes waiting for your kids to finally go to bed so you can have some precious 'me time', to feeling genuinely present and uplifted, hanging out with the people you love the most, even when they're not on their best behavior.

No more beating yourself up. No more picking yourself apart for everything you do. I'll help you get to the root causes for your most stealthy habits. To learn more about private coaching, go to HabitsOnPurpose.com/consult and we'll meet on Zoom to see if my coaching is a fit for your goals. I'll see you next week.

Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit HabitsOnPurpose.com. Tune in next week for another episode.