

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

[Habits On Purpose](#) with Kristi Angevine

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

Welcome to Episode #72. This is your host, Kristi Angevine. This week we're exploring perfectionism. Perfectionistic thinking is nearly universal amongst smart high achievers. Yet, so many don't recognize this common habit for what it is.

Next week, I'm doing a free workshop on Perfectionism. This week, I'm bringing you one of the most listened to episodes from the podcasts archives; Episode 3 "You Might Be a Perfectionist If...". If you haven't already signed up for the free workshop, go to HabitsOnPurpose.com/Workshop2023 and sign up to attend live, or get the replays. Let's dive in.

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. This is your first time listening to the podcast, welcome. It means a lot to me that you've taken time to tune in this episode that you're about to hear, is not to be missed. Now, if you're a longtime listener, and you've heard this one before, I guarantee you'll notice things you didn't appreciate the first time.

On the episode, I go over the important difference between high achievement thinking and perfectionistic thinking. I also cover the subtle ways perfectionism shows up that might not be on your radar. And I'll explain precisely why you might not self-identify as a perfectionist, even though you indeed have some of the hallmark traits.

And then, if you want to continue on to have a live discussion about perfectionism and how to start changing it, you're going to want to join me on June 21, 2023 for a free workshop on Perfectionism. You can sign up at HabitsOnPurpose.com/Workshop2023 and you can attend live, or just wait and I'll send you the replay. You'll learn how perfectionism may be showing

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

up for you, and you'll leave the workshop knowing exactly what to do about it.

Now, before we start this archived episode on perfectionism, I want to remind the women physician listeners that the next round of the Small Group Coaching Program for Women Physicians is currently open for enrollment. At HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP, you can find all the details about how the program works, when we meet for coaching calls, the structure, the philosophy, and you can hear what other women physicians say about their experience.

There's also a replay linked there, of a recent Q&A, that people find really valuable when they're trying to decide if HOPP is a match for their goals. That page, to visit for more information, is HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP.

Now, why consider HOPP? Physicians face so many challenges, from a dysfunctional medical system that dehumanizes everyone in it, to enormous EMR responsibilities, to gender pay inequities, and remarkable productivity expectations, just to name a few. And while we can't change the culture or the system of medicine overnight, there are areas where we do have control. And this is where the HOPP coaching program comes in.

Coaching is an evidence-based intervention shown to have a meaningful impact on burnout, emotional wellbeing, and developing a sense of agency. All of which are absolutely essential if we're going to get through life without feeling perpetually overwhelmed and reactionary. So, if you're ready to stop feeling like you're drowning, and start being in the driver's seat of your life, Habits On Purpose for Physicians is the place for you.

HOPP is capped at 30 women, and spots are first come first serve, so go to HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP to sign up. When you sign up by June 19, you get an extra special bonus of an additional one-on-one coaching call. Now, let's dive in to all things perfectionism, shall we?

Today I'm talking about one of my favorite topics, the habit of perfectionism. In this episode, I'll define perfectionism in a way that might

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

be surprising to you, and then discuss the problems with it and how it diverges from high achievement thinking.

I'll go on to touch on the reason why about half of all perfectionists don't self-identify as perfectionists, and then I'll outline how it shows up and give you a practical step you can take to start changing this habit now.

Now, you might not consider perfectionism to be a habit. You might consider it to be an inherent personality trait. But I assure you, that although some people may be more prone to it than others, it's actually a habit; a habit that is learned and reinforced with repetition.

As a habit, at one point in time, it served a purpose, even if it's worn out its utility now. And as a habit, it encompasses behaviors, as well as a certain habituated mindset. Now, perfectionism is one of my favorite topics, because probably one of the biggest surprise A-Ha moments I had when I was going through coaching, was recognizing my own perfectionistic tendencies. When I never ever, ever, ever would have thought to self-identify as a perfectionist.

But knowing what I know now, I am definitely a recovering closet perfectionist. So, as I was creating this episode, the irony of all ironies, is that even with all the progress I've made on my own habit of perfectionism, my brain offered me an enticing platter of perfectionistic thoughts.

Things like, "It has to be just right. It will probably be so lame. I should probably wait until I know exactly what to say before I start. When I feel confident, then I can do it." I don't know how many presentations, workshops, talks, I've given on this subject, and yet, that well-rehearsed part loves to surface.

But just like I'll teach you, just because I hear those thoughts, doesn't mean that I'm obliged to believe them. And yet, just because I know that I'm not obliged to believe thoughts, just because they're there, doesn't mean that I didn't grapple with them. And it wasn't pretty, and it didn't feel great.

I had to make space for that old perfectionism to come up. But because I've been doing this for a while, I knew to expect it and that made it so much

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

easier to handle. It makes me think of surfing. Like, I'm now aware that there are some strong currents or choppy water, but if I want to surf at my favorite spot, I still have to paddle through that shit to get where I want to go. Now, to all the expert surfers out there, that could be a terrible analogy that doesn't work for you, but it's the image that comes to my mind.

Now, this brings me to one of the things I want to reinforce throughout this podcast: You don't have to have your habits perfectly figured out in order to feel better. And in order to do a pretty damn good job in your day-to-day life. You don't have to be perfect to go for your goals. And as my five-year-old says, "Everything doesn't have to be perfect."

Let's get really clear on what perfectionism is and why it's so easy to miss. Now, I have a lot of mentors and several teachers, many of whom have been instrumental to all the personal work I've done and to contributing to my knowledge base as a coach. You're going to hear me mention them here and there on future episodes.

If I had to pick one that inspired my work on perfectionism the most, it's definitely Kara Loewentheil. She's a brilliant human, whose work I was first introduced to through my life coach training program and by following her podcast *Unf*ck Your Brain*. If you don't already follow her, you should totally get to know her.

She does incredible work unpacking systems of structural oppression and internalized patriarchal mentalities. And what I learned from Kara was a twist on the definition of perfectionism that shifted everything for me. Now often, perfectionism brings to mind type-A personalities, immaculate homes, nothing ever being out of place, flawless execution of all things.

But this definition makes it easy to miss the bulk of perfectionistic tendencies. Perfectionism doesn't mean you're perfect. Perfectionism is the belief that everything should be perfect. That what you've done in the past should have been perfect and could have been perfect. That what you do going forward should be perfect.

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

It's the belief that flawlessness is the only acceptable outcome. But it's more than just this. What I learned from Kara, is that at the heart of perfectionism is the belief that 'it's always better to be better'; "Once I'm better, then I'll be okay. Once I'm better, then I'll believe I'm okay."

So, let's take a minute to think about what happens when you believe that 'it's better to be better'. When it's always better to be better, and to do better, then you're always striving for a moving benchmark. And if your sense of self-esteem or worth is tied to that benchmark, then your sense of self is pinned to an ever-advancing line in the sand.

This is at the core of the "once/then" mentality; "Once I balance work and hobbies, then I'll feel free. Once I'm caught up, then I can relax. Once I'm fitter, thinner, prettier, then I'll feel confident. Once I have a clear vision for my life, then I'll feel settled. Once my to-do list is complete, then I'll feel peace." You get the point.

So, what's the real problem with the habit of believing it's better to be better? You might be thinking, isn't that just the price you pay for having high standards? Now, if the habit of perfectionism was really useful, that would be one thing. But the habit of perfectionism actually increases stress, reduces productivity, and totally stymies growth.

And it's really important to distinguish, perfectionistic thinking is not the same thing as high achievement thinking. Here, check this out. High achievers are ambitious, self-disciplined, and have a strong desire to attain meaningful, bold goals. High achievement mindset aims for excellence, but along the way, enjoys the pursuit and the learning. And high achievers know how to be satisfied with great work even if it's imperfect.

To a high achiever, their worth is not paired to success. And fails are critical ways to learn and grow, not personal indictments. High achievers recognize that the enemy of "good" is perpetually trying to make something better and better and better, at the expense of getting the job done. They understand that growth happens not despite discomfort, but because of it.

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

Which means with growth, there's always a risk of failing and being judged. But the growth that comes with that risk is totally worth it. Staying on the safe side and aiming for perfection, in order to reduce the chance of failing, is the fastest way to do as Shirley Hufstедler says, "To decide you don't want to grow anymore."

Now, perfectionism comes in a variety of forms, but in general, in huge stark contrast to high achievement thinking, perfectionism encompasses perpetual self-improvement, an ever-moving benchmark for self-esteem and worth, and an intolerance for anything less than just so.

What happens is this, when you're always striving, you don't appreciate where you are. When it's never good enough, you aren't ever satisfied, no matter how good you're doing. And self-improvement isn't just to grow, but to fix a deficit. This sounds like, "When I lose weight, get in shape, stop eating or drinking to fix my emotions, quit ruminating, quit numbing with work or exercise, stop people pleasing, then I'll feel content and at peace and I can relax," etc.

From a perfectionistic point of view, failure is seen as a huge problem. So, perfectionists spend lots of time and energy trying to avoid it. These efforts to be perfect happen at the expense of excellence. Now, why does this happen? It takes so much longer to accomplish tasks because of all the fretting over making sure that it's just right.

So, tons of mental energy may go into worrying about hypotheticals. Like, "What if they don't like it? What if they judge me?" And imagining perfection, and comparing that to reality or comparing oneself unfavorably to others. And since life is finite, why would you want to spend your precious mental and emotional energy doing this?

Now, if you like numbers and find pictures powerful, check out the failflow.com site. It gives you the number of weeks that you've lived and how many weeks you have left, if you were to live to the age of 91. Now, seeing the image of weeks lived and the weeks remaining is really powerful. So, if you're near my age, and you are going to live to the age of 91, you probably have around 2,400 weeks until you die.

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

We have this limited time, these limited resources, so why spend them believing 'it's better to be better'? On that cheery note, let's address the fact that many perfectionists don't realize they're perfectionists. Why is this? There are two reasons. Many perfectionist have no clue that they have the habit of perfectionism because they think that perfectionists are perfect. And since they are nowhere near perfect, they can't be one.

Or they think that they're only perfectionistic in one area of their life. Like, they're only perfectionistic with work or in the operating room or with their eating or with their parenting. The truth is, the mindset of perfectionism isn't one you can confine to one single area.

For me, I didn't see myself as a perfectionist because I was nowhere near perfect. In my view, I was barely getting by. I procrastinated because I had no idea where to start. I thought that for something to be high quality, it needed to feel easy to do. And I believed I was woefully incompetent, no matter how well I did.

I pulled things off last minute, and I assumed that it was always easier for other people. When something was easy for me, I just discounted it as nothing meaningful. Yet what drove all my angst was this idea that 'I should always be better than I was'. And yeah, I could get things done and do excellent work, but it was always so much harder than it needed to be.

If I could quantify the time I spent worrying about getting something just right and remove that, I would have had so much more time and energy that could have been available for other things. So, perfectionist aren't perfect. They just hold the belief that perfection is the goal, and that 'it's better to be better'.

And being perfectionistic in one area is enough. The mindset may not seem to explicitly guide all your decisions, but it's likely there more than you realize. Now, many of you who are listening either already self-identify as having a perfectionistic habit, or you just totally do not. If you're in the latter, you might be surprised by the ways it shows up. And that's what we're going to dive into now.

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

How does this mindset, that 'it's better to be better', that things should be done as close to perfect as possible, actually show up? There are four main aspects to the habit of perfectionism: rigidity, judgment and fixation on deficits, gear of failure, and to focus on the destination rather than the journey.

I'm going to give you examples of ways the habit of perfectionism can show up, and as you listen, you can take your own inventory. Now, the caveat is this, any of these actions I'm going to list off can arise from something other than perfectionism. But as you listen, see if you can connect how many of them are a natural extension from valuing perfection, and believing it's better to be better?

Does this ever sound like you? Being bothered when things don't go according to plan. Bristling at chaos, unpredictability, or not being in control. Fixating on what's not right. Focusing on the mistakes. Harping on and trying to control minutiae. Beating yourself up. Maybe judging yourself harshly, but not seeing it as harsh. Having a perpetual self-improvement project. Worrying about what others might think of you.

Taking things personally. Seeing criticism everywhere, even in benign neutral comments. Comparing and despairing. Desiring validation or reassurance, but having difficulty taking compliments. All-or-nothing, black-and-white thinking. Or how about over generalizing? Saying, "The entire thing was a fail because of that one fumble." Thinking, "If it's not 100%, why bother?" Or thinking, "A job worth doing is one worth doing well."

Your flavor of perfectionism might include a fear of failure. This presents with things like difficulty starting tasks, procrastination, thinking you have to know everything before starting or deciding, rationalizing things like exhaustive pros-and-cons list and research as, "Just being thorough." When really, it simply shields you from taking action where you might actually flop.

Taking small, strangulated actions or last-minute action. Having trouble making decisions for fear of making the wrong one. The analysis-paralysis procrastination rush cycle, which results in not doing as well as desired,

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

labeling it a huge fail, and then going on to fear future fails. Maybe it shows up for you by holding an unrealistic definition of success, and worrying about not doing things right.

Disliking learning in front of others. Thinking that public failure is something to be avoided at all costs. So, you might avoid trying things that are new, or act like you know what's going on even if you don't. Or maybe your habit of perfectionism shows up by fixating on results or the future, at the expense of being present in the present moment.

This shows up as setting goals that are really out of reach, totally unrealistic, and unsustainable. And trying to do too much, all at once, in too little time, and do it all perfectly. You may miss enjoying the present or the pursuit. You might be always “shoulding” yourself, believing that you “should” be doing something better or differently. You might be very quick to discount or discredit anything positive or any progress you make.

You might downplay achievements as flukes. Or you might just have a fantasy of what things will be like when everything is perfectly in order. And enjoy how amazing it feels when you imagine this fantasy. But you rarely relish or savor or bask in your wins, or the present moment, before you just move on to the next thing.

Which of these things can you relate to? Consider, when you spend your time showing up from this place, ultimately, you'll never feel you're good enough, no matter how much you do or how hard you try. So, while you may have, up to this point, thought of perfectionism as a strength, it actually takes more than it gives. It interferes with excellence. And when it's used as a metric for worth, all it does is create more stress and more striving as you hustle for your worth.

And this is how perfectionism keeps us small, limits growth, and actually decreases enjoyment of the present moment. Now, whether you hear this list and think, “Yep, that's me,” or you hear this list, and your jaw is on the ground, because you're thinking, “I never knew I had a perfectionistic habit,” all is not lost.

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

Since all of these behaviors are actions, they're simply behaviors driven by feelings. And many feelings can drive these actions. But in general, it usually boils down to things like anxiety and fear. Things like insecurity, or self-doubt, some flavor of “not enoughness”, or fear of failure. And since it's our thoughts that create our feelings, the way we change this habit of perfectionism is to first be aware of the thoughts that precede our behaviors.

Remember, like all habits, perfectionistic thinking developed as a solution and served a really great purpose. On a very basic level, the habit of perfectionism keeps you safe by helping you avoid failure. And we're designed to see failure as very dangerous.

In this way, aiming for high quality, and hoping to avoid messing up, is really quite adaptive. At one point in time, it may have fueled really hard work. It seems to help avoid mediocrity. And, frankly, it's a mindset that's really rewarded and prized in many fields.

So, now what? How to change the habit of perfectionism? Well, first off, there's no quick fix. Unwinding perfectionism requires understanding why the habit developed in the first place. It calls on us to do deep work with things like examining why the habit made sense to us in the past. What we make failures mean. How we may have coupled achievement with worth, and why.

But the process can start with one simple thing. The one simple thing is awareness. Awareness of when you're believing it's better to be better, and when you're believing that perfection is the goal. And the way you do this, is you pick one behavior that you heard from that list. That you notice that you do. That seems like it's coming from a perfectionistic mindset.

Maybe it's overediting an email reply. Maybe it's ruminating on what's not going well. Maybe it's “shoulding” yourself, or having “once/then” statements; “I should work out more. Once I'm in better shape, then I'll be less of a loser.” This week, just notice when you do that behavior.

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

And when you notice it, step into the watcher role, or that curious research student role, and say something like, “I noticed I’m ‘shoulding’ right now. I wonder why? What am I feeling? What am I thinking? What am I worried about?” This simple step is the first place you go to start developing awareness.

So, let's recap. Perfectionism is a habit. And as a habit, it has served some purpose. Perfectionism is the idea that ‘it’s better to be better. And the only acceptable outcome is flawlessness’. Now, many perfectionists don't realize they're perfectionists, because they erroneously think that perfectionist are perfect.

And noticing the perfectionistic habit is really tricky because it doesn't always sound as overt as, “I must be perfect, otherwise I'm not worthy.” Perfectionistic thinking masquerades as ‘just having high standards’. But it's much different than high achievement thinking.

There are many, many ways that the perfectionistic habit shows up. And most of the time, it's driven by feelings of anxiety and fear. And ultimately, it's an impediment to growth and productivity. The antidote to it? Starts with your awareness and curiosity.

So, have a great rest of your week. And I'll see you in the next episode.

Like what you heard? Join the workshop on Perfectionism. If you're listening in real time, that workshop happens next week, June 21, 2023. You can sign up when you go to HabitsOnPurpose.com/Workshop2023.

And if you're a woman physician, and you're ready to start taking ownership of your experience, to change habits like perfectionistic thinking, second guessing, self-criticism, compare and despair, and more, enrollment for the HOPP Small Group Coaching Program is open now. We start July 11, 2023, and we meet weekly for six months. HOPP is an intimate group, capped at 30 physicians so that everybody gets individual attention.

So, if you're ready for an evidence-based approach to learn things that no one taught you about habit change, go to HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP

Ep #72: Perfectionism: Understanding the Habit

and get all the information, and sign up. Remember, when you sign up by June 19, 2023, you get an early enrollment bonus of a 50-minute private coaching call.

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. Why wait to start feeling better? Check out the details today. I would love to see you there.

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.