

Ep #101: Setting Boundaries for Professional Women with Dr. Sasha Shillcutt



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Welcome to Episode 101, and welcome to 2024. I'm your host, Kristi Angevine, and I am here to help you understand why you do what you do so you can live your life more on purpose instead of on autopilot. Let's get going.

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.

Today, we're going to be talking about the complex topic of boundaries; what they are, why they're sometimes hard to articulate, and why they're hard to maintain. And who better to help me with this topic than Dr. Sasha Shillcutt?

Sasha is an international speaker on topics of gender equity and work/life control. She's authored two books *Between Grit and Grace: The Art of Being Feminine and Formidable*, and *Brave Boundaries: Strategies to Say No, Stand Strong, and Take Control of Your Time*. She's also a full-time cardiac anesthesiologist, and CEO of her own organization, Brave Enough, through which she leads conferences and retreats for women professionals.

What I love about talking with Sasha, she packs a lot into a little. You might actually relisten to this episode to make sure you don't miss all the gems and wisdom that she gives. She's smart, she's funny, she's really insightful, and she gets what it's like to juggle life and work in medicine, as a woman.

I really loved our talk. We talk about boundaries. We also discuss friendship, the myth that likeability is power, and how to start setting boundaries in your real life. I hope you enjoy.

Before we start, I want to just give you a reminder of two things. Number one, to celebrate the new year and crossing the triple digits to 100 episodes, there's a special drawing giveaway that is underway. I'm giving

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away one free registration to a 2024 Women Physicians Wellness conference of your choice.

Registration includes conference attendance, CME, journals for reflection writing, breakfast each day, mid-morning refreshments, and a welcome reception. WPW is not your run-of-the-mill medical conference. Yes, it's national speakers who talk about self care, leadership, and personal and career development. But it also has wellness built into the structure of the conference.

There are half-day sessions, a relaxing tropical location, think Aruba; Amelia Island, Florida; Grand Cayman. Then there's mindfulness, mind/body workouts and guided meditation built right into the itinerary every day. Registration is valued at \$1,950. One lucky listener will get that waived and get it for free.

The deadline to enter is January 15th. So, to enter go to HabitsOnPurpose.com/wpw2024 and enter now. You can enter for yourself, you can gift it to a woman physician that you know needs this kind of R&R, or you can refer a friend to enter herself. Again, that's HabitsOnPurpose.com/wpw2024. The deadline is January 15th.

Secondly, the next round of Habits On Purpose for Physicians small group coaching starts in February, and early enrollment will start soon. You're going to hear more about the small group coaching program over the next few weeks. But if you've been listening to me talk about it over the years and you already know it's for you, you're going to want to get on the waitlist at HabitsOnPurpose.com/waitlist.

Those on the waitlist will be first to hear about early enrollment, as well as early enrollment bonuses. Now, early enrollment is important since the group size is very small; we cap at 30 people to maintain an intimate space.

Habits On Purpose for Physicians small group coaching mixes didactics, coaching, and community, to help you stop overthinking, stop

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overextending, stop second guessing, self-criticism, people pleasing, and numbing, without resorting to willpower. So, check it out at HabitsOnPurpose.com/waitlist.

Now without further ado, here's my conversation with the lovely Dr. Sasha Shillcutt.

Kristi Angevine: Thank you so much for coming on the podcast. It's amazing to have you here.

Dr. Sasha Shillcutt: Well, I am a huge fan of your podcast. So, I'm honored to be here.

Kristi: Sasha and I were just kind of giggling a minute ago, because we were having some connection challenges and talking about how this is just how life goes sometimes; your AirPods don't connect. For me, my Zoom password that I thought worked, doesn't work. Or my settings are off, or whatever.

We're recording this right around New Year's, it just happened, and we'd been talking about how it can be a little disorienting sometimes reentering from having some time off during holidays, and then getting back into the swing of things. I, for sure, have felt like I needed to recalibrate. But that's where we are, when we're talking about this.

Sasha, one of the things I love to ask my guests who are on, after we sort of talk about what's going on in our actual world, can you tell me where you are in the world? And if you are... I'm not sure if you're by a window, I get the sense you've got some natural light there... But if you're by a window, what can you see out your window?

Sasha: Oh, I love this question. I am in Omaha, Nebraska. I live out in the country, so I live on farmland. It's very pretty and green, normally. But right now, I'm staring out my window in my office area, and it's very foggy. So, I can't really see beyond the first couple evergreen trees, but it's kind of beautiful. It's like a little winter wonderland. There are icicles on the evergreens. Yeah, that's what I'm looking at.

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Kristi: Oh, wow, I love just hearing that. I mean, I love being able to see you, but knowing what is around you is also amazing. So, I would like us to start this conversation off with, number one, just saying, I am so grateful for the work that you do with your people.

I've heard about you for a long time. We actually crossed paths, I went to one of your retreats, and we've been at conferences together. I think the work that you do is so important. And so, I'm really curious to hear a little bit of your backstory, about how you came to doing so much personal development work?

Sasha: I love that question. Thank you very much for your kind words. It makes me feel good to know that something I'm doing is helping people. Especially coming from someone who I know is so genuine and honest, like yourself. So, that just fills my cup today, and I appreciate that kind feedback.

I really never thought I would be doing what I'm doing now. It's probably because I didn't think I would burn out and want to quit medicine. I did, in 2013, which led me to really take about a year to rebuild myself. I mean, I'd completely lost myself to medicine and motherhood. It was like the perfect storm.

In 2014, I really worked hard to kind of do some major self-evaluation. At the end of that year, I was a lot better. I had more joy in medicine, boundaries, and all these good things. But I was really lonely. I realized I haven't worked on friendships with other women in like a decade. I just kind of let them all slide. It wasn't intentional, it was just part of the grueling aspect of having an early career in medicine and having kids.

I just had no friends. I mean, I had friends, but not that I felt like I could really be honest and transparent and encouraging, or even encourage them. And so, I started this small Facebook group, which really became just some place for women to feel like they could ask questions about everything from lipstick to negotiation to whatever they wanted.

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That group, it was very apparent to me that what I would write in that group, or what I would say in that group, or how I managed that group, was really special. I recognize that I am leading this group of women that really fills my bucket to serve them.

And I needed to do it in a way that felt important, in the sense, not important to me but like I needed to make it real. I needed to get it out of this Facebook group and actually materialize it, so that we could do things like have a conference and have a retreat or run a course.

I didn't know anything about running a business or anything. But I did have a background in research, a background in grants, and a background in managing funds. And so, I started looking at that group as, instead of 'I have this little secret Facebook group that I don't tell anybody about because it's kind of embarrassing.'

I started really transitioning my thoughts to, "I have this really cool Facebook group, and it's amazing. I want to do things for the women in this group, but I don't know how to do it because I don't have a business." And I'm like, "Why do I have all these limiting beliefs about 'I run a business,' when I know how to run a grant?" And a grant is no different than just getting funds to do research that you think is important to you.

So, I stepped out on a limb, kind of like you have done, becoming an entrepreneur, and not knowing anything about it. I did not really start the group to become an entrepreneur. I mean, I became an entrepreneur to serve the group. Since that time, I would say being an entrepreneur is the best professional development course I've ever taken.

I've learned so much about myself in the process of running my own company, that it would take me years to teach a course. The course would last for years, if I had to teach someone all the things I've learned about myself becoming an entrepreneur. And so, that is what I do now.

I still practice cardiac anesthesiology, and I love that, but my true passion that I've embraced is that I'm an entrepreneur. I'm an entrepreneur who

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runs a business that helps women, and serves women, learn work/life control, and how to set boundaries. I love it.

Kristi: I love so many things about what you just detailed. I mean, there are so many good points there about taking something that was more theoretical, and maybe a little bit more virtual, making it into something really concrete, and doing the work to do that.

This idea of becoming an entrepreneur out of this desire for service, I think will resonate with a lot of people. I agree, I'm right there with you, that I think owning your own business, starting your own business, being an entrepreneur, is the best way to find your room for growth.

It's kind of like saying, "Oh, you know what? I think I'll go back to residency again, except with no blueprints, and feel like my skin's being peeled off every single day. That sounds so fun." It's hard.

And so, this is a plug for anybody out there who is thinking about doing something a little bit outside the box. Whether that's changing how you practice medicine, or starting a business. Whatever it is, if it feels unnerving, that's completely normal.

Sasha: I think that if people don't find it terrifying, they're either lying, or they're not doing it.

Kristi: Yes, I completely agree. It's very easy to look out and see other people doing things that maybe you find interesting, that you might like to do, and come up with this construct that 'they look like they've got it all together. That it's so easy. That it's fine. That there aren't deep lows. That there aren't imperfections, messy things,' because of maybe how it looks from the outside. And, that's not really real, but it's easy to think that that's true.

You mentioned that a seed for doing this work is recognizing that you'd let some friendships slide. I think so many of us can relate to that, I know I can, for sure. Just being busy, having my focus not just be on myself and my partner, in my hobbies, but including my kids, including my patients.

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Kind of being last on my list, much less thinking about people I'd like to connect with.

The thing I think is interesting has to do with that intersection of friendship and boundaries. Because you do a ton of work on boundaries; your book is *Brave Boundaries*. And so, I'd love to talk a little bit about friendship and boundaries. Because I think a lot of people think, "Oh, you only have boundaries for bad situations, or when you want to make sure you're not being taken advantage of."

I'd be curious to hear your take on it. But I don't think that's how boundaries are best used. So, I'm curious, if you could just first define what you mean when you say boundary?

Sasha: When I think of a boundary, I define it as anything that allows me to match my priorities with my time. That can be boundaries with your partner, boundaries with your work life, and boundaries with yourself are probably the most important. You're right, for me, when I first learned about boundaries, it was in a negative connotation, like you need boundaries around this toxic thing.

But the more I studied and really read about boundaries, the boundaries allow you to keep the good in; they aren't just about keeping the bad out. If you don't have boundaries, the world will set them for you.

And I always say the world runs on women who lack boundaries, because it's true. I mean, from education to childcare. Eighty percent of healthcare workers are women. Everybody runs on women with no boundaries. The world would stop spinning if all women had boundaries, sadly.

But what we have to remember is that they are what allow us to stay well and show up fully for the people and the work that we love. So, if you're constantly frustrated and you're burned out, or you're over committed, or you're in a toxic environment or relationship, I guarantee you, if you think about it, you probably lack boundaries around whatever pain point that is.

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For me, I had no boundaries, so therefore I had no free time, and therefore I had no friendships. I mean, it was very simple. I didn't have women that I could text in a minute and say, "I'm struggling with this. I'm really having a terrible... I'm in my thoughts today. How do I hire a nanny, because my nanny just quit?"

I didn't have that, and the reason I didn't have that is not because I'm a bad person and because I'm not a good friend, or because I don't want it; it's not because I didn't want it. It's because I literally had no ability to say no to things like unpaid work, or work that was overwhelming me.

I didn't know how to say no to my kids. I lived with constant 'mom guilt' because I worked all the time. So, I thought, "Well, when I'm home, I have to be with my kids. I can't go out to lunch with girlfriends. That's so selfish," right? So, it wasn't until I really had boundaries for myself, until I could recognize how important it is to have those relationships and those friendships with others.

Kristi: That's so good. One of the things that I learned, when I was learning about boundaries... Because I also had a similar idea of learning, that boundaries just for toxic situations. As opposed to, as you so nicely said, allowing you to keep the good in... is that a sign that a boundary is breached can be the feeling of anger.

So, if I witnessed an injustice or something infringing on a boundary of mine, I might feel the emotion of anger. I mention that, simply because so often we will see an emotion like anger as unprofessional, not very nice, it's not something to listen to. But I think it's just a signal that a boundary has been breached.

I think a clue for when there aren't boundaries, when there's a lack of boundaries, is kind of what you were describing with feeling guilt, feeling like you've lost yourself, feeling stressed, feeling perpetually stuck or exhausted. That might be a clue that there just aren't boundaries there.

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Sasha: Absolutely. You're 100% right. What a good summary that you just made, Kristi, because that's exactly true. I always say, a lot of times, we expect people to have the same boundaries we do, and they don't. Nobody has the same priorities we do. Nobody's going to have the same boundaries you do. Even the people that live with you and love you, and know you best, do not know your boundaries unless you speak them into existence.

And, we often confuse love with boundaries. We think, "Well, why does this person, why does my spouse or my partner, keep coming in when I'm trying to work on something? Why aren't they respecting my boundaries?" Well, they don't know that you have been busy all day, and that you have 30 minutes to get this deadline done. You're asking people to read your mind.

Or, "Why does this person keep texting me when I'm on vacation?" Well, probably because they don't mind if you would text them when they're on vacation. So, they assume that it goes both ways, right? This is where courage comes in. What I say is, you have to get used to disappointing nice people, by stating your boundaries to people, and explaining your boundaries.

Because most of the time, 99% of time, they're going to be like, "Oh, okay," and they're going to move on with their day. They're not going to have this negative reaction that we've built up. If they do, that's even more of a reason to set a boundary with the person, right? So, we have to also take ownership of the fact that no one knows our boundaries unless we tell them.

Kristi: It's part of adulting; articulating what doesn't maybe seem like it needs to be articulated, because of that assumption. So, this brings me to this question I've been wanting to ask you. Can you talk a little bit about what makes setting boundaries so difficult for many of us?

Sasha: I think for most, and I'm speaking specifically to women here, but for most women, we are taught that likability is power and likability is success. The more we say yes and agree, and are agreeable, the more likable we

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are. The more likable we are, the more successful we are going to be. The more successful we are going to be, the easier life is. I mean, this is just the pathway that we're taught.

We are not accepted, as women, when we set boundaries. Men are applauded; applauded for setting boundaries. Women, we just don't get the same, sadly, response oftentimes. And so, in our mind, the last thing we want to do is disappoint someone that we like, or say no to someone in power.

That's why we end up doing all these things like citizenship tasks; which I've actually published on. Which are tasks that are unpaid but someone has to do in the workplace. So, we take on all this extra work in our home and in our workspaces because we don't want to be seen as not agreeable or unliked. We just crave being liked because it's the easier path. It's the path of least resistance.

It's so opposite of how we've been raised. To be someone who sets boundaries, and says, "My plate is as full as I'd like it to be. This is how I prefer to be talked to. This is how I prefer to be reached. I'm not accessible on these days." It's just it feels so wrong to us.

Kristi: Yeah, it goes against the grain, in the face of so much of the social mores and socialization. Particularly in medicine, but other fields too. Particularly in our patriarchal society. So, can you share, this can be something old or something recent, an example of a boundary that you set that allows you to match your priorities with your time?

Sasha: Oh my gosh, yes, I love this. Okay, just today, I had to do this. So, I love speaking. Public speaking and traveling, and going to conferences and speaking at conferences, are some of my favorite things to do.

In 2019, right before the pandemic, I think I did like 35 talks, or something crazy, insane. I really realized, "This is burning me out so bad." Because one talk, flying somewhere, even if it's for 16 hours, which is the average time that I spend somewhere, honestly, to give a talk. It's like two days of

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your life, and then you're tired and exhausted. There's just a lot that goes into travel.

And so, what was happening to me was, I would try to do these big keynotes. Then, I'd also have all these friends who'd be like, "Can you just pop in and give me a 30-minute talk, and come to dinner?" Of course, I want to do that because it's my friend and I love this person. And so, I was just totally overcommitted. I had to set a boundary for myself, which was really hard.

The first one was like, "I'm only going to travel, at max, once a month for anything." Which meant vacations, soccer trips, and talks. I was like, "Oh, my gosh, this is going to decrease my talks to four or five a year. How can I do this? Nobody's going to buy my book. Nobody's going to know me anymore. I'm not going to get a book published." All these negative thoughts, right?

Also, I was like, "Everyone's going to hate me. They're going to be mad at me. I'm going to have to say no. I need an algorithm for what I'm going to say yes to." So, I created that for myself. It has to be this topic that I'm really passionate about. It has to be an audience of this size. It has to fit with my life schedule. It has to be these months; like, "I'm not going to give any talks in May, June, July, or August, when I'm doing soccer and kid stuff."

Which was really, really scary. I'm talking my yeses went from 40 or 50 a year, to five or six a year.

Just today, I got an invite for a talk by a person that I really respect. I like this person. It's not in a month that works with my life. It's not a topic or an audience that fits with what my purpose is for 2024. I had to say, no.

Now, was it hard to say no? It was hard to write that three-minute email knowing that I would let this person down, and say no to them. But on the same hand, it felt so empowering because I honored myself. I know, when

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that month comes, I'm going to be so glad that I'm not exhausted from traveling; because I'm traveling for kid stuff.

That's just an example of what I call a boundary. The hardest boundaries I have are with myself. They're the hardest ones to honor. But I know this is what I wrote: This is what I'm speaking on in 2024. I'm not doing anything that doesn't align with this.

Kristi: That's so great to hear, the idea of saying yes today, to something that matches some of the boxes, may actually have consequences tomorrow that I don't like. So, if I can say yes to the 'tomorrow me' priorities, even though in the moment it may not feel the greatest, that's actually the best gift.

I love how you described creating a little algorithm, sort of like a decision-making tree, for 'this is how I'm going to know that I'm going to say yes to these, and no to these.' Side note here, this means you're saying no to some things that are really darn good, so you can say yes to things that are excellent. But it doesn't mean that the things that are really darn good, aren't amazing. It just means that it's just not a fit for the bigger goal.

So, imagine somebody listening to this going, "Wait, hold on. You have to have an algorithm to remind you of how to say yes and say no? Isn't it simple? You just say yes or you say no." But it's not simple. It makes perfect sense, because just like it's not easy to realize how stressed we are, sometimes it's so easy to miss how overextended we are.

Sasha: Yes. I always look at it like you're going to a buffet. You're like, "I want to try that, I want to try that, and I want to try that." You put a million things on your plate, and you eat a third of what's on your plate. Even though you want to try it, it looks great and you know you'll love it if you can save room for it. But you can't.

That's kind of how life is, right? I have to have the algorithm because I actually want to say yes to all these things. I like all these things. I'm an extrovert, I love going and meeting new people. But it doesn't serve me and

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my health, when I know in six months I've said yes to this thing and I'm going to be tired, that I'm going to show up half as me.

That's not even honoring the person that invited me. They deserve to have somebody there that fits with their life, fits with their priorities, fits with what they want to talk about. Could I give the talk? Sure. But am I going to be the best person for them, as well? No. So, it's a good ego check.

Setting boundaries is such a good ego check. Because a lot of the time, the reason I want to go to these things is because of FOMO; it doesn't serve me. Or I want to make somebody happy, and make somebody like me. But honestly, it doesn't serve me to do that. And so, it's a really good ego check when you set these boundaries for yourself.

Kristi: So, let's talk about something really practical. For somebody who's listening to this where all of this rings true, and they realize, "Oh, I'm either boundaryless, or I really struggle with making boundaries, but I don't know where to start." What is something that somebody who's listening can do to, number one, realize they need to set some boundaries and get started?

Sasha: I have something in the book called "the boundary inventory." I talk about this in the book; about really starting with your pain points. Imagining what boundaries are around them, or what boundaries you need, and what thoughts come up. Because a lot of times, it's about disappointing someone or changing a habit.

So, maybe we've always served in this capacity at our kid's school, or we've always done this thing at work, and that no longer serves us. The expectation that we have in our brain is, 'everybody likes me because I do this.'

And so, it's really getting back to those thoughts that we have around why we have to continue to do this, or why we need to continue to let someone treat us this way, or why we continue to let whoever take advantage of us. It always comes back to a limiting belief that we are holding on to.

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A very good example is just to pick your biggest pain point in life and then strip that down, and go through the boundary model. It's not as scary or as hard as it sounds; it does take work and effort. But what's great about it is, boundaries are contagious. So, when you set a boundary, you're like, "Oh my gosh, that went great."

Like I just said no to this talk. The person sent me a really nice email, and said, "Thanks for letting us know so quickly and not keeping us on the hook." They didn't cuss me out. They didn't say they're never going to talk to me again. It was okay. It builds your confidence to set more boundaries.

Kristi: So, if somebody picks their biggest pain point, and they want to sort of do the boundary model around it, where do they start? What do they do?

Sasha: The first question they ask is: What boundary has been crossed, or what boundary is not there? And the second question is, why? Why is the boundary not there? Is it because you're afraid to confront the person? Is it because you feel like no one else can do it?

So, these are very common things that we have as women. "I have to do this because no one else can do it as good as me." Is it because you're afraid of the loss of monetary value? "I can't step down from this leadership role, or this stipend, even though it's totally killing me. Because I have to have the money? Is it, "I want these people to like me." What is it?

The second thing is really going to be an exercise that I actually learned from my attorney, the very first time I had to be deposed for something. I had an attorney practice with me. We went through every negative scenario. It was so much more stressful than the actual deposition itself. It was such a good learning experience for me that that's what I have you do when you go through the boundary model.

Practice talking through that, saying the boundary, or writing the boundary to someone. What does that bring up? What are your biggest fears? Because 99% of the time they don't come true. The response that we get to the boundary is a fraction as scary as what we thought in our mind.

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Then, setting a date and a time to exacting out the boundary. Like, writing the email, or having the conversation or the phone call. So, it's really practical, and not as scary as it sounds.

Kristi: That's so great. So, ask yourself what boundary's been crossed? Then, why is it not there? So, you can build that awareness for why it's not there; whether it's likability or whatever. Then, play out the fears you have around it, so that you can show yourself that whatever you're scared of probably isn't as likely as you think, and you probably can handle it. Then, make that concrete, with the date and time to do it. I totally love this. This is so good, Sasha.

I think people listening to this are going to want to learn more, they're going to want to hear more from you. I want you to tell them about your books. Besides learning about you and your books, how can people find you?

Sasha: You can find me on my website at BecomeBraveEnough.com. I have a Friday newsletter, it's probably the best thing to start with it. It's called The Scoop. I send out my thoughts for the week. I also have a podcast called the Brave Enough Show. But really, honestly, everything's on the website. So, if you just sign up for my newsletter, you'll figure out how you can listen or read or work with me.

Kristi: That sounds amazing. So, everybody who's listening, if you don't already follow Sasha, go follow her and learn about her. Sasha, thank you so much for sharing so much of your story of yourself, and your wisdom. It's just so fun to connect with you.

Sasha: Thank you for having me on. It's been awesome.

Want to start taking your own wellness more seriously? Enter the drawing for a free registration to the 2024 Women Physicians Wellness conference of your choice, at HabitsOnPurpose.com/wpw2024. I'll be at all the conferences in 2024. I'll be there as an attendee in Aruba and Amelia Island, and as a speaker in Grand Cayman. I'm actually talking about what

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every physician leader should know about perfectionism and I would love to see you there.

The other way that you can start taking better care of yourself is by getting coaching. The next round of HOP starts in February. To be the first to hear details about early enrollment, and hear about special bonuses that are only available to those on the waitlist, go to HabitsOnPurpose.com/waitlist. 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.