

Psychology Notes — Episode 5

The Habits You Didn't Choose

Clinical Notes and Viewer Takeaways

The Core Premise

Much of what we think of as “judgment” is, in practice, patterned response. That can be difficult to accept, especially in aviation, where we place enormous value on individual skill, personal responsibility, and disciplined decision-making. But psychology suggests that many behaviors do not originate in conscious choice. They arise from repetition, environmental cues, social reinforcement, and what the human nervous system gradually learns to treat as normal. This is not a flaw in human beings. It is how human beings learn. The problem is that the same mechanism that helps us acquire useful habits can also quietly install unsafe assumptions, unnoticed shortcuts, and patterns of silence that undermine safety margins over time.

The central question in this episode is:

How much of what you do was deliberately chosen... and how much was absorbed?

Behavior Often Feels Personal—But It Is Frequently Social

Human beings are highly adaptive. We do not learn only through formal instruction. We learn through observation.

We absorb:

- How others respond under stress
- What gets challenged—and what doesn't
- What is treated as important
- What is routinely overlooked
- Which deviations generate concern, and which pass without comment

Over time, repeated exposure to these cues creates a psychological baseline. That baseline becomes what “feels right.”

And once something feels normal, it rarely triggers scrutiny.

This is where culture becomes behavior.

Implicit Learning Happens Below Awareness

One of the most powerful ideas in psychology is that much learning occurs without conscious awareness.

You may not remember learning a behavior.

You may not even think of it as learned.

Yet it shows up in your actions reliably.

This is called **implicit learning**, and it is how much of culture is transmitted.

In aviation, this may show up as:

- A way of conducting a preflight that was modeled but never formally taught
- A communication habit inherited from peers
- A maintenance practice accepted because “that’s how it’s done here”
- A reluctance to question something because no one else appears concerned

None of these may feel cultural.

All of them are.

Normalization of Deviation Is Usually Quiet

Rarely does drift announce itself.

It typically begins with a small deviation.

Nothing bad happens.

So the brain updates:

This must be acceptable.

Repeat this often enough and what began as deviation becomes routine.

This is one of the more dangerous features of human cognition:

The mind often treats repeated success as evidence of safety.

Those are not the same thing.

A procedure can “work” many times and still be eroding margin.

Attention Is Selective, Not Comprehensive

People often assume that if something important were wrong, they would notice.

Psychology does not support that assumption.

Attention is limited.

It filters.

It prioritizes.

And it routinely excludes information outside what it has already deemed important.

This is why people can miss what later appears obvious.

Not because they were careless. Because they were human.

The question is not:

What am I paying attention to?

It is:

What might my attention be excluding?

Silence Is Not Neutral

One of the strongest ideas in this episode is that silence carries meaning.

When something occurs and no one reacts...

...the brain interprets that.

It often interprets it as approval.

That is how silence becomes a teaching force.

What is not corrected may become tolerated.

What is tolerated may become normalized.

This applies far beyond cockpits.

It applies in maintenance shops.

In control towers.

In briefing rooms.

In relationships.

Silence does not simply fail to interrupt behavior.

It can actively reinforce it.

Viewer Takeaways

1. Examine What Feels “Normal”

Ask yourself:

- Where did I learn this habit?
- Was it explicitly taught or simply absorbed?
- Would I defend it if I had to explain it to someone new?

If you can't trace the origin of a habit, examine it.

2. Treat Familiarity as a Risk Factor

The longer something has gone unquestioned, the more worthy it may be of questioning.

Familiarity often reduces scrutiny.

Don't let comfort masquerade as correctness.

3. Use Deliberate Interruption

Create moments that interrupt automatic behavior.

Examples:

- Brief before routine flights you could do from memory
- Debrief events that “went fine”
- Ask: What almost became a problem today?

Small interruptions help prevent silent drift.

4. Speak Earlier Than Feels Comfortable

If something seems worth noticing...

...it is probably worth saying.

Waiting for certainty is often waiting too long.

Silence rarely improves weak signals.

5. Build Personal Safety Memory

Record what you notice.

Write short notes.

Capture patterns.

Debrief decisions.

Experience becomes learning only when it is retained.

Final Perspective

This episode is not suggesting people are passive products of culture.

It is suggesting something more hopeful:

What is learned can be re-examined.

What is absorbed can be made visible.

What has become automatic can be brought back into awareness.

That is where change begins.

And in aviation, awareness is often the earliest form of safety.

Closing Thought

You are always being shaped by something:

What you notice.

What you repeat.

What you permit.

What you leave unspoken.

The question is not whether those forces exist.

The question is whether you are aware of them.

And whether you are willing to interrupt them.

Because sometimes the habits you didn't choose...
are the ones most worth examining.

ON SECOND THOUGHT — EPISODE 5

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