

Change...And not the kind that jiggles in your pocket

The changing of seasons from summer to fall has got me thinking about change...

How Change Affects Us

With every new season comes change, and we know that the season change is coming as it has come the three months before that and the three months before that for years and years as far back as we can remember, but even a change as consistent as a season can still be jarring, discombobulating, and uncomfortable to difficult, painful, and downright annoying. I find myself feeling resistant to the increasingly colder weather and earlier sunsets, knowing that winter is coming and wishing that summer would continue on. I imagine others feel similarly.

Every time the seasons change I am reminded of the simple fact that change can bring a whole host of feelings, thoughts, sensations, and insights into consciousness. Change is, in other words, a whole experience in and of itself. It's usually transitional and fleeting but it is no less an experience. With a beginning, a middle, and an end, change can last a few moments or years. And even when we are not aware of any change in our lives or the impact of a change on us, it likely is affecting us in some way or another.

Why am I making such a big deal about change? Because change affects us and it affects some of us more than others, and sometimes it affects us very negatively or very suddenly. And sometimes, we are not conscious about how it is affecting us, and this is particularly dangerous if it's also affecting us very negatively.

How We Meet Change

How we meet change is important because in every moment of our lives we are confronted with change; change is happening all around us all the time. Some examples of continuous change in our lives are time and age. Time is always changing from one moment to the next as is therefore our age. But aside from the obvious ones, how many times has it happened that you drive down a street you've driven down a hundred times only to find that a building is being torn down or a restaurant at which you've eaten is going out of business. More startling might be a change closer to home, like your child growing up and then moving out. Change is occurring and affecting us all the time, whether we notice it or not, whether we want it or not.

With all this change, it's amazing, in fact, that any of us feels stable or secure in our lives. How do we do that?

Experiential Exercise: Take a moment to think about how you meet change in your life (journaling in response to the following questions might bring you to some interesting insights about yourself):

- What is the difference between how you meet change you've created and that which has just happened without help from you?
- And how about how you meet change that results in negative outcomes compared with positive outcomes?
- How do you meet change that is inevitable versus change that might not have occurred had something not have happened to precipitate it?

- How about gradual versus immediate change? What are other forms of change in your life that feel really easy to deal with?
- And forms of change that feel really difficult or perhaps even impossible?

How to Effect Change

As a therapist and meditation teacher, people usually find their way to my office because they are looking for change in some form or another. Whether the aim is to feel better, to lead a more balanced life, or to find resolution to personal struggles, they are proactively seeking change.

So how can we effect change in our lives?

Following are steps to generating real, long-term change:

Step 1: You must want globally to change.

Well, this might be obvious, but there is good reason for me to mention this explicitly. It's not just wanting that sets change in motion, but global wanting, wanting holistically. You need look no further than the classic New Year's resolution for an example of how wanting change is not enough to create change. If a New Year's resolution results in change, it's often times temporary and short-lived. Why does that happen? Because not all of you wants to change; there is at least one part of you that want to change as well as at least one part of you that either doesn't want to or isn't willing to change.

Step 2: Identify the parts of you that don't want to or are unwilling to change.

Perhaps your goal is to exercise regularly, so there is one part of you that wants to exercise more regularly, but you currently don't exercise regularly. You don't exercise regularly because there are other parts of you that dominate your experience or sabotage your ability to reach your goal of exercising regularly. What are those other parts? Attempting to answer this question is the start of your inner investigation.

You will be ready to change once you can identify all the various parts of yourself that prevent you from realizing your goal of exercising regularly. Perhaps there is a part of you that doesn't want to exercise regularly because you grew up with health-nut parents that you never wanted to be like. Perhaps there is another part of you that is too tired to exercise because it's spending too much energy in other aspects of your life. Perhaps there is a third part of you that fears failure and is afraid that if you start to exercise that you won't feel better and thus nothing will have really changed. These are just a few examples.

Step 3: Resolve inner conflicts until all of you is ready to change or the parts of you that aren't are willing to go along with the program.

If we identify these various parts of ourselves, we can see much more clearly how they create and perpetuate inner conflicts that exist within us and keep us stuck right where we are instead of moving toward where we would like to be. We can only create long-lasting change in our lives if all of the parts of ourselves are willing to change. Once we identify the parts of ourselves that don't want to or aren't willing to change, we can deepen our relationship amongst these warring parts of ourselves. This part may require professional help, though. A good therapist will be

able to help you resolve whatever it is that is keeping the warring parts of yourself from coming to some kind of peace or reconciliation such that you can actually make shift toward your goal.

Step 4: Address fears.

By this point in your quest for change, you have likely already become aware of some degree of fear. The most common fears that arise somewhere amidst this process are fear of the unknown and fear of failure, but most likely if you're tuned into your emotions and/or looking for it, you will encounter fear. This is a normal and natural part of change, so try not to fear the fear itself. Use the fear as your guide...

- If it's overwhelming, then you might want to reconsider making the change right now. Maybe there are good reasons not to change. If you're committed to the change, then see what you can do to work with the fear. Exercise, walking, journaling, creative expression, meditation, yoga, ta'i' chi, massage, martial arts, and time with loved ones are helpful in times of stress. A therapist or coach might be helpful.
- If the fear is big but not overwhelming, then what can you do to reduce it and/or relax so you can move through it and not be paralyzed by it. Exercise, walking, journaling, creative expression, meditation, yoga, ta'i' chi, massage, martial arts, and time with loved ones are helpful in times of stress. A therapist or coach might be helpful.
- If the fear is easily manageable, then learn from it. Is there something different about the fear this time as opposed to other times you've been on the brink of making a change? Are you managing it better than usual and if so, then how so?

Step 5: Cultivate mindfulness, and do something different.

It's hard to change when you aren't present enough to consciously make those decisions responsible for keeping you on the same old path. Wake up! Start paying attention to yourself—to your feelings, your thoughts, your body or sensations, and your spirit or soul in one particular moment. See if you can start to identify what is happening within you in just one moment, and then in the next moment, and in the next, and so on. Try to cultivate awareness in those moments that precede the decisions that keep you on the same old hamster wheel. If you can do this, then you will have choice in those moments, and you will be able to choose to do something different. Here are some ideas for bringing mindfulness to those moments:

- Set an intention to be aware in those moments.
- Practice mindfulness meditation.
- Practice yoga, ta'i' chi, or some other contemplative practice.
- See a psychotherapist.

If you can be present for those moments in which the change is necessary in order to set you on a different path, you may encounter (more) fear, but don't let it stop you if you are ready for change. Take a deep breath and take one single baby step down a different path. Just one step. Congratulate yourself and pay attention to your feelings, thoughts, body, and spirit. You have just altered your future by proactively and consciously choosing a different course of action in the present.

Step 6: Be compassionate, patient, realistic, and forgiving.

- Show compassion towards yourself as you are going through transitions, regardless of whether you are choosing to change or change is choosing you. Compassion is

“sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it” (Merriam-Webster online dictionary). With change, you are likely increasing distress, (i.e. fear, stress, and anxiety), although the change might alleviate other distress (the distress of not changing).

- Be patient. If you are not a patient person, this is a great opportunity to work on building patience. Remember that real long-term change can take time, especially if it is a matter of undoing old, deeply entrenched patterns. The older, the more habitual or more unconscious, the harder habits are to change.
- Be realistic. Real, long-term change often happens much like crossing a ballroom doing the bunny hop. You might take a step forward, and then you'll take a step back, and maybe the next time you'll take a couple of steps forward and one back. Think about some difficult changes people make like losing weight or quitting smoking. People try and they presume that they've failed, and they feel bad, but how are they defining failing? Is failing quitting and relapsing? Maybe to some, but it's not realistic. As long as you are mindfully making some choices that will bring you closer to the change you're seeking, then you are succeeding not failing.
- Be forgiving. Forgiveness is the act of ceasing “to feel resentment against (an offender)” (Merriam-Webster online dictionary). In trying to move forward toward what you want, you must also permit yourself to take steps in reverse. Remember that there may be a part of you that doesn't want to change and is rebelling, attempting to sabotage your plan to change. Go back to Step 3 if you need to. Remember that you are learning not just how to change this one aspect of your life, but by making conscious change, you are also learning how to make conscious change in your life in general. We learn best when we have supportive teachers that push us in certain moments and hold our hands in others. Be your own biggest supporter by exercising self-forgiveness, especially when you most need it because those are often the moments in which you are least interested in offering it.

Step 7: Positively reinforce the behaviors you do that get you closer to what you want instead of negatively reinforcing the behaviors that you don't want.

This is applied empirically-based learning theory. This is what you should be doing with your pets, your children, and anyone in your life attempting to learn from you, including yourself. Give yourself positive strokes for the strides you make towards goals, especially lofty or challenging ones. A reward doesn't have to be tangible; discover enjoyment in simple positive reaffirming statements. For instance, when you actually show up to the gym, you might take a moment to acknowledge how you feel about the step, however small, you've just taken toward your goal. You might consciously think, “I'm really proud of myself just for showing up at the gym tonight”, and then give yourself another moment to feel the pride. Rewarding yourself in this way is also a way of bringing mindfulness to the change you are making and its effects on you while you are in the process of making it. It's a powerful tool to be able to reward yourself like this because it requires only an inner dialogue, an ability you carry around with you always.

7 Steps for Effecting Change:

Step 1: You must want globally to change

Step 2: Identify the parts of you that don't want to or are unwilling to change.

Step 3: Resolve inner conflicts until all of you is ready to change or the parts of you that aren't are willing to go along with the program.

Step 4: Address fears.

Step 5: Do something different.

Step 6: Be compassionate, patient, realistic, and forgiving.

Step 7: Positively reinforce the behaviors you do that get you closer to what you want instead of negatively reinforcing the behaviors that you don't want.

Try these out, and if you'd like, let me know how they work for you, or better yet, journal about it.