

## CAN PEOPLE CHANGE, AND HOW?

*“Some people never change.”*

That’s the type of disheartening realization that we often form when someone’s disappointed us. And it happens all through life. You put your faith in a person everyone else has given up on and, despite your idealism, he lets you down. You give someone a second chance, or a third, fourth, and hundredth, and even though it shouldn’t surprise you, you feel a little dumbfounded when she takes advantage of your trust or kindness. Or maybe it was you who didn’t change—who has tried again and again to scrub your spots away, only to succumb to the belief that perhaps they are permanent. Sometimes change can feel near impossible. But is it literally? With the right amount of will and determination, can anyone change?

For a long time, the leading research suggested that our personalities were fixed in childhood, and from those personalities stemmed our behaviors. In 1884, the scientist Sir Francis Galton proposed the lexical hypothesis—the idea that we’ve created words for the most important

and socially significant personality differences between us. In 1936, Gordon Allport and H. S. Odbert identified nearly eighteen thousand personality-describing words, which have been narrowed down through time and further investigation into the Big Five, as these are referred to: openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and extraversion. These evolved from extensive research into personality and language.

We all possess all of these attributes to some degree, but we rank in different percentiles. No one is completely neurotic or, on the flip side, 100 percent emotionally stable. No one is a total extravert or introvert. The newest research suggests that our personalities aren't ever set in stone, but rather evolve and mature over time. We are never stagnant, and if we allow ourselves, we can learn and grow all through our lives. While some employers still rely on personality testing to gauge our suitability for jobs, the good news is that we don't ever have to pigeon-hole ourselves into specific, defined ways of being. We don't have to believe that we are powerless to change things about our personalities. It might be uncomfortable to learn new tricks, but it *is* possible. Whether or not we actually learn them is largely dependent on what we believe.

For a long time I lived with two conflicting beliefs that, had I kept them, would have ensured I could never change what I did, how I felt, or how I experienced the world. I can trace their roots back to when I started running, in late 2001, after I had decided the only way to eclipse my emotional pain was to physically escape it.

Before my time in NYC, I moved from Massachusetts to Washington State to live with a stranger I met on the Internet. I figured the best way to overcome my misery was to get far away fast from the scene of my adolescent crimes—my self-imposed isolation and everything I did to numb myself. Six months later, I crossed the country on an Amtrak train, disappointed that a relationship built on a foundation about as strong as a house of cards hadn't saved me from myself.

It wasn't until after I'd toured the United States for six months with marketing companies that I decided to transplant myself to the city where dreams come true. I believed my greatest strength was my courage—that I was willing to take massive risks and change homes and jobs in a heartbeat. What underlay that need for change was a far less romantic belief: that my only hope of happiness was to somehow outrun myself. I would never have guessed that constant movement can be paralyzing, but that's exactly what I learned in New York City.

It wasn't until I was curled up in the fetal position in my fifth-floor filth, shortly after my aspiring entrepreneur “friends” Rich and Jim left, that I began considering that my misfortune might be a gift. Later, as I sat at my window chain-smoking, swigging whiskey, and staring down at the throng of other suburban transplants I was afraid might not like me, I realized no one could possibly like me less than I liked myself. I was in the perfect position to implement change.

I had no one to distract me from the root of my disillusionment with myself. No one was going to hand me a permission slip to wait it out. No one was about to cast me to live permanently in someone

else's vision. It didn't matter where I lived; it would always be a prison if I didn't learn to be part of the world. It didn't matter how much money I made; it would just buy me more pairs of high heels that looked ridiculous under my underachieving, bug-infested bed. It didn't matter if I had a job I loved; it would just be a bigger distraction from the truth that I didn't love myself. Right then, in a completely imperfect world, the time was perfect to work on myself. I had only one choice: choose something to do with my life and muster the courage to start.

A week later, I signed up to volunteer at a yoga studio in exchange for free classes. I'd taken a few classes before, and I remembered experiencing two powerful things: a deep sense of inner calm as my slowed breathing decelerated my thoughts and agonizing discomfort as the teacher pushed my legs deeper into a hip-opening pose. I wanted more of both the peace and the pain—the former, because it felt good, and the latter because I wanted to do better at getting through the inevitable moments when life wouldn't.

Every night at 6:00, without fail, I grabbed my yoga mat from under my raised twin-size bed and walked the three streets to the studio. No matter how I felt during the day, no matter what I had accomplished, or hadn't, I made my way back to my mat.

During my time staffing the front of the studio, I got the opportunity to learn a lot about the owner. She told me she'd smoked for almost a decade and was slowly healing herself. I wasn't quite there yet. More times than I care to admit, I stood on the corner of Thirty-

seventh and Eighth clutching my yoga mat in one hand and a cigarette in another, imagining the wafting smoke branded me the world's biggest hypocrite. I couldn't just be proud of taking a positive step; I had to berate myself for not leaping over the massive chasm between who I was and who I wanted to be.

At the end of every yoga class, everyone does one final pose known as *savasana*. It's when you let your body absorb the effects of the class by lying in stillness for a few moments on your mat. Something about being all sweaty and exposed, closing my eyes, and relaxing in a room of other people made me feel a little like vomiting. At the end of most classes, I tiptoed out of the room while other students were melting into a blissful state of openness and peace. But one night, about two months in, I challenged myself to stay. At first my body opposed this plan. My arms and legs jittered and my teeth chattered while I felt an overall magnetic pull toward the door. Even after a class of moving meditation, I wanted to get back to my cave. I told myself that I could fight it all I wanted but I wouldn't be getting up for three minutes and that, if I chose to, I might even enjoy it. Miraculously, it worked. I don't know that I'd ever experienced a state of calm being with so little resistance, at least not while left alone inside my own head.

After class, I felt completely unburdened by my usual angst, fear, and containment. I even complimented one woman on her multicolored yoga bag. I told another woman her practice inspired me. And then I said yes when she asked me to grab a bite to eat.

I instantly regretted it. She might not be as friendly outside the studio. I might want to leave but feel trapped in conversation with her. And worst of all, I wouldn't be able to smoke for at least another hour. As we walked to the sandwich place down the street, I fidgeted with my hair and bit my nails, trying to satisfy the nervous energy that was screaming at me to run home and stuff five Marlboros into my mouth to make up for lost time.

I would like to say I remember even one single thing she said, but to this day I have no idea. All I know is that she *did* speak words, and physically I was capable of hearing and understanding them, but my thoughts were way too loud to allow it. All the openness I created in class filled up with a swarm of anxieties and fears, but I'd passed the point of no return; the only option was to get through this meal. I'd push through it, like I pushed through so many other uncomfortable moments, and then run back to safety as soon as I could. It could be like it never happened. I'd be alone soon enough.

At some point during my inner diatribe, my cigarette pack fell out of my pocket. Maybe I was willing it out with my mind. Or maybe it wasn't my friend after all. Maybe my habit was trying to sabotage this new relationship, which would clearly have been deep and fulfilling had I not just proven myself a poser—and not the yoga kind. Whatever the case, I was outed. I was not what I seemed. I was a fraud. I hadn't changed at all. I was weak and intrinsically bad.

I take back what I wrote earlier. I will never forget one thing my classmate said when she saw the pack and then heard my confession of

meaning to quit: “Good for you, honey. It can be so hard. Keep coming back to class. You’ll get there.”

This woman who hardly knew me, whom I’d been secretly plotting to desert, was unconditionally compassionate and kind to me. She didn’t focus on what I was doing wrong; she didn’t hone in on my inability to instantaneously transform my life into the picture of health and happiness. She didn’t judge me for being flawed or form general assumptions about who I was based on my challenges. Instead she recognized that I’d made a positive choice and that, if I kept at it, I could change over time. She saw me as a complete package—the sum of my strengths and my weaknesses. I was not someone to be ashamed of; I was someone to be proud of. There was nothing wrong with me. My choices could use improvement, and I was working on that. I was not a weak person; I just gave in to weakness sometimes. I was not a bad person; I just made bad choices sometimes. Regardless of all of that, I deserved understanding. I was not someone to escape; I was someone to love.



**The very act of making a different choice is in itself change.**

We are all people worth loving, regardless of what behaviors we may want to change—and we all have the power to change, even if on some days our resistance feels about as overpowering as a riptide. We may not always open ourselves up to new possibilities, but that doesn’t

mean we're unable. We may have days when we're not very friendly or compassionate, but that doesn't mean we have to experience every day guarded and closed off. We might experience high levels of stress and insecurity, but that doesn't imply we'll always experience the world with a sense of worry and fear. On any given day, we can change the way we act and interact with other people. The very act of making a different choice is in itself change. Whether or not we can sustain those changes depends largely on what we believe and what we tell ourselves.

Most people are far more compassionate and patient with other people than they are with themselves. You'd probably never tell your friend that she's worthless if she was having trouble changing her eating habits. You likely wouldn't berate your mother for feeling too scared to go out and meet new people. And yet you form overarching conclusions about yourself and your character based on your own shortcomings and setbacks. We expect immediate results and get frustrated and disappointed when we don't feel like we're making progress fast enough. If change isn't instantaneous—if we can't recognize it through considerable alterations to the world as we know it—we assume it isn't happening. That feeling of resignation is precisely what keeps us stuck, or perhaps more accurately, feeling stuck.

We can get unstuck at any time—that much is clear. What can be slightly more confusing is *how*. With that in mind, I asked on Twitter, “Can people change, and how?”



## CHANGE STARTS IN OUR MIND

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People can change when they realize that the pleasure of changing is greater than the pain of staying the same. ~@AdamHansen

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One of the reasons people change is because they educate themselves. ~@Queen\_Isis\_24

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People can and will change by realizing the difference between what they think and who they are and acting on it. ~@MrWaffleable

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Change happens when we stop identifying with our ideas, opinions, concepts, beliefs, and judgments. ~@mullet3000

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People change as soon as they try to see themselves from a different angle. ~@skaterearth

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Since the advent of the personal-development industry, we've become increasingly determined to improve ourselves. In 2007, the *National Post* (Canada) referred to professional coaching as the second-fastest-growing career in the United States. Though this form of coaching is primarily geared toward achieving professional success, it involves identifying and challenging fears, attitudes, and thoughts that inhibit growth. We all have them, and sometimes we're so determined to see outward change that we skip the vital step of evaluating the beliefs that stand in the way.

Henry Ford said, “Whether you think you can or you can’t, you’re right.” The same is true for change: if you don’t believe you can, you can’t. We form beliefs all throughout our lives that limit the choices we make. Sometimes that’s a good thing. If you believe you are a kind person and that kind people look out for others, that will limit your choices, too, but in so much as it prevents you from kicking someone else in the face or stealing her thunder at work. In that regard, the belief guides you to choices that make you feel good about yourself.

But that’s not how beliefs always work. Sometimes our beliefs directly oppose our wants and leave us feeling stuck and bewildered. What makes it all the more perplexing is that we often confuse facts and beliefs. Facts are nonnegotiable; beliefs are interpretations. We don’t always recognize the difference.

When I started my first blog, prior to *TinyBuddha.com*, I wrote a post called “10 Reasons It’s Awesome the Economy Sucks.” I had a feeling it would elicit a strong response because most people react to decreased financial security with terror and stress. My theory was that we can feel an increased sense of personal power if we change what we believe about the immutable facts of the economic meltdown.

Fact: Unemployment requires lifestyle changes. When you make that first uncomfortable sacrifice, you may decide that you can’t possibly be happy in your new reality because it will continue to be challenging. Once you do that, you’ll likely look for evidence to back it up. Every time you have to go without something, you’ll make a mental note of how much better things were before, and how right you were to

resist this new reality. The alternative is to challenge that belief when you're inclined to form it. Instead of assuming all sacrifices will be painful, you can decide it will give you an opportunity to be resourceful and channel gratitude for what you still have. The belief you form will dictate how you feel, what you think, and how you act. The limiting belief keeps you unhappy and closed off; the other one opens you up to possibilities.

Psychologists suggest that we don't hold on to a belief unless there's some type of payoff in doing it. We wouldn't willfully choose to feel trapped and unhappy. We hold on to these beliefs because they give us something we think we need. So let's say that you want to improve your financial situation, but when you were growing up, your parents always referred to wealthy people with choice expletives. You may have formed the belief that you can't possibly be both a good person and well-off. No matter how hard you work to improve your situation, you'll feel an intrinsic pull toward self-sabotage. The payoff? You don't have to deal with the discomfort of thinking that you're somehow a bad person.

The hard thing about beliefs is that sometimes they serve a temporary purpose but later become unnecessary. At twelve years old, I formed a belief that if I didn't leave my house, I was less likely to hurt. At the time, it was true. Since I was tormented in school, it made sense that if I didn't show up, kids couldn't hurt me. Granted, that wasn't the only way to escape the pain of their harassment—and clearly was not a proactive approach to changing things—but it was certainly one way to

avoid those uncomfortable feelings. It was a valid belief: stay away from the cause and I minimize the effect. Later in time, it no longer served me. Staying inside caused me lots of pain because we social creatures weren't made to be contained.

The other day I read an article on *PsychologyToday.com* that cited a fascinating study about limiting beliefs. Researchers put a glass wall in the middle of a long aquarium. Every time the goldfish inside tried to cross the tank, they banged their little scaly heads into the wall. Over time, they became conditioned to stick to one side to avoid the pain they'd come to expect. Even after the researchers eventually removed the glass partition, the fish never tried to explore the other side. Their limiting belief kept them confined to the world they had always known—even though they clearly wanted to know the other side at one point in time, and they could easily access it now.

We carry around so many different beliefs that we often don't even recognize some of them. We just know what feels good, what feels bad, and which one of the two we prefer. The thing is, we don't always realize how good things can feel on the other side of how they are. We don't recognize that being healthy might feel better than comfort eating, or that trying something new might be infinitely more satisfying than staying with the familiar. We don't always realize how close we are to knowing a new world that's even more fulfilling than we ever knew to imagine.

Can changing your mind change your life? Not in and of itself, but you have to change your mind to change your choices, and that will affect your life.

## CHALLENGE LIMITING BELIEFS TO CREATE CHANGE.

If you suspect that your beliefs are holding you back:

**Make a list of your “I can’t change” excuses.** Start with the simple question: *Why can’t I* (lose weight, quit smoking, maintain a healthy relationship, change jobs, etc.) Now write down everything that comes to mind—all the different things you believe to be true. Do you think you can’t lose weight because you’re too weak? Or you can’t quit smoking because your job is stressful? Or you can’t have a healthy relationship because you have too much baggage?

**Highlight everything that’s not a proven fact.** Go through your excuses with the intent to poke holes in them. Some of them may be valid, but many will be limiting beliefs disguised as facts. It’s not a proven fact that you’re weak. It’s not a proven fact that someone with a stressful job needs to smoke to deal with it. It’s not a proven fact that you have “too much baggage” (how much is the right amount exactly?) or that people with baggage can’t be happy in relationships. (I’m living proof!) It may help to imagine that your best friend is feeding you these excuses about his own life. What beliefs would you challenge in him?

**“Why?” your way to freedom.** Ask yourself: *Why* do I believe this—when did I form this belief? Did it come from someone else or my environment? *Why* am I holding on to it—what’s the payoff for me? Does it allow me to feel better about not taking action? Does it feel

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safe? *Why* is it so important that I let this go—what amazing conditions could I create if I considered the possibility this belief isn't fact? *Why* am I talking to myself instead of doing something today to change this situation I so clearly want to change?

## YOU HAVE TO REALLY WANT TO CHANGE

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People can change, but they have to want to. It requires courage and the willingness to experience all that comes with change. ~@quietdream625

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People change when they can stop lying to themselves. The truth will set you free. ~@miss\_morrison

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The desire to change from within is crucial to progress forward on a different path. ~@FeliciaOnFire

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Growth allows for change. As long as people continue to grow, spiritually and mentally, change is indeed possible. ~@HauteinLA

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In order to be somewhere new, you have to know where you are and why you want to go. ~@MsEmilyAnarchy

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Something very interesting happens in our brains when we experience change in our environment. Remember that fight-or-flight response I mentioned before, along with the amygdala? That same

fear conditioning pushes us into panic mode when something in our environment changes. Interestingly, Buddhist monks who engage in compassion meditation are believed to regulate their amygdala; by tempering their fear response and other emotional defenses, they're best able to open their hearts. If we want to open ourselves up to change, we essentially need to do the same thing.

Have you ever felt certain that you wanted to make a positive change in your life only to find yourself coming up against massive internal resistance? You knew the benefits and you had the best intentions, but subconsciously, you were trudging through quicksand. It's not that there's something wrong with you for struggling to muster motivation or push through discomfort. Your brain is creating a roadblock to what you think you want—it's pushing you to question whether you even want it at all, considering how scary and different it is. It's precisely why we say we want one thing and then do the exact opposite—why I spent years saying I wanted to be part of the world but then nearly hyperventilated whenever I spent too much time in an uncontrollable environment. The amygdala senses colossal change and then braces us for impending doom.

Jeffrey Schwartz, author of *The Mind and the Brain*, explains how our brains form ideas that limit our ability to change. The things we repeatedly tell ourselves create “mental maps” that prepare us for what to expect in life. Then we tend to experience reality exactly as we anticipated it, whether it's actually that way or not.

A good friend of mine is always telling me she doesn't enjoy her work and she'd like to do something more fulfilling and lucrative with her time. Yet she never researches other careers, looks into taking classes, or even tries to visualize a future that involves a job that isn't mind-numbingly boring to her. She devotes a significant amount of her energy to lamenting the way things aren't without ever doing anything to change how they are. I suspect it has a lot to do with two critical pieces of her past: she has an advanced degree that has not yet helped her land a great job, and she's been fired from several jobs she didn't love. Based on our conversations, I've surmised that she believes no matter what she does, she can't get a good job—and even if she does, she'll probably somehow mess it up. If she's using the mental map she built based on past experiences, that logic might make sense. But the future doesn't have to repeat itself. She has a choice in how it unfolds.

The best way to navigate new territory is to create new mental maps. Research indicates that we do this most effectively when we reach our own insights, as opposed to when someone else tells us what to do. It's why advice so frequently falls flat: in order for us to get past the discomfort of our thoughts and conditioning, we truly need to have our own epiphanies. It doesn't matter if I tell my friend a million times she could change her life by switching careers. She has to reach that conclusion on her own.

So how do we reach these new conclusions? How can we even begin to implement change when we're not fully on board, and nothing



anyone else tells us can change that? How can we challenge our own resistance when our resistance is just as strong, if not stronger, than our desire? Awareness is the first step. They say to name a thing is to have power over it. Once we realize that there is something biological at play, it's a lot easier to step outside ourselves and plan to circumnavigate it. So it isn't that we're weak or incapable; it's that we need a little more material to build an effective new mental map.

We do that by gathering one little piece at a time. Oftentimes we think if we're not affecting major change, then change isn't happening—but all that does is cause us anxiety, triggering that good old amygdala. Massive change will always be scary, but small, manageable steps slowly reprogram your expectations for the life you're creating. If you brainstorm about possible jobs and then make two calls today, you'll see that taking one simple proactive step isn't nearly as terrifying at it seems. Once you get that down, you might consider calling a few more. Once again, there's no reason to anticipate disaster. The same can be said for starting a new exercise program. If you're usually inactive and you try to run a marathon, you'll likely be overwhelmed and disappointed in yourself. Jogging for ten minutes, on the other hand, sets you up for a greater chance of success.

Every now and then, I ask on Twitter, “Is there anything I can do to help or support you today?” It's my way of reminding whoever might be reading that we are not alone, and someone somewhere is there to help. Recently someone asked me, “What do you do when you feel like your whole world is crashing down on you?” I responded, “I stop trying

to put it all back together for a bit and let myself deal with my feelings. Then I start rebuilding one piece at a time.”

It’s the only way anything can change—one small piece at a time. Not only is it compassionate to let yourself operate without the pressure to instantaneously transform, it’s also the smartest way to deal with the mental challenges you, and every single one of us, face.

### **CREATE A NEW MENTAL MAP.**

To start creating incremental change:

**Identify the pain this way of being causes you.** Psychologist Edgar Schein has identified three precursors to a change in behavior: a sense that the situation causes pain or dissatisfaction; survival anxiety, which is the awareness that you will be more uncomfortable if you don’t change; and psychological safety, which means that you feel safe to explore and make mistakes without fear of repercussions. Start with the pain: What pain is this behavior causing you? Are you struggling financially because of it? Is it putting your health at risk and limiting your day-to-day joy?

**Enlist help to form your own insights.** This also falls under the umbrella of “psychological safety.” It always feels a lot easier to explore new possibilities when you have the support of a friend, coach, therapist, or group. The goal here is to challenge the expectations and

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attitudes that are keeping you conflicted and stuck. Don't run to the friend who is always doling out advice like everyone's personal guru. You need someone who is going to help you unlearn and relearn for yourself. The goal is to have your own epiphany about the attitudes that are keeping you paralyzed.

**Make one small behavioral change at a time.** Once you feel certain, for yourself, that you truly want to make this change, start with one behavior at a time. Don't try to change everything you don't like about your life at once. Instead, choose one behavior, knowing you may not always do it perfectly, and work to make it a routine. It will help if you create some type of system for positive feedback, whether that means charting your own successes or joining a support group. When you feel good about what you're doing, it naturally requires less effort.

## CONSISTENCY CREATES CHANGE

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People can change, but consistency is key. With consistency and stability, clarity and maturity soon follow. ~@**YogaStudioSouth**

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Change requires open-heart[ed] reflecting on what one really wants to change, catching that behavior and modifying it, little at a time. ~@**glaughlin**

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By remembering to act and think like the person you want to be, it gradually becomes who you are. ~@**debismyname**