

ALL ABOUT CHANGE

How to Successfully Make
Personal Life Changes

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To my grandfather:

I know you'd be proud of this.

INTRODUCTION

#TakeChargeOfYourChange

Change is a daily topic of conversation in all of our lives. Reflect on the conversations you've had this week. How many times did you use the word change? How many different contexts did you use it in? Change your mind. Change your clothes. Change a diaper (at least ten times a day in my house currently). Change your work-out routine. Change your address. Change your boss. There are *thirty one* entries for the word "change" in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*—two main entries along with twenty-nine subentries. We use the word change *a lot* and in many different contexts.

A common context people tend to use the word change in is with emotionally negative sayings about change that we've all heard. Change is inevitable. You can't control change. Change is the one constant in life. Change is scary. These sayings set the mental stage for change to be challenging, forced, and wild.

Then, when you do a quick internet search of “What do people think about change,” you get results in three generalized themes. These themes may be frustrating because they seem not to relate to you and the type of change you are undergoing.

Search Themes:

1. Corporate Related: Results about how leaders and organizations make changes, which don't seem to apply to personal change at all. For example, one of the first search results is an article from *Forbes* that initially looks like it might take a personal approach from the wording of the title, “The big reason why some people are terrified of change (while others love it).” Then you read the first sentence, and nope, it's an article about change through the lens of the workplace (Murphy, 2016).
2. 10-Step Programs: Lists of tips and tricks on how to go about changing habits and/or behaviors in your life for everything from traveling to losing weight to starting over in a new relationship to investing your money.
3. Articles asking “Why?”: Why do people resist change? Why is change so hard? Why can't I make this change? Why do people struggle to change? There are endless articles that blend together, as they all play on the same emotions.

The common phrases we've heard and the thousands of internet search results all paint change in a negative light. You either get tips and tricks that should help you because you haven't managed to succeed yet on your own or you get

negative questions that make your change seem even more hopeless. No wonder people have a negative mind-set about change and they try to resist it every time a change comes their way!

What if we thought of change differently? What if instead of thinking, “Change is scary, and I can’t control it, so I’m going to avoid and resist it,” we thought, “I have an opportunity for change! What can I do to harness it and use it to bring more success and joy into my life?” My friend Kimberly told me this improved pattern of thinking is how she approached the changes her circumstances brought her, though she didn’t start out thinking this way.

Kimberly’s childhood home wasn’t far from where she decided to go to college, but it might as well have been on the moon because she’d never left home before for any extended period of time. She left early for school so she could work at the student bookstore, and she went home every weekend and every holiday. It was her routine, and it never changed. She was a classic homebody who liked the certainty of her lifestyle. Then one weekend during her freshman year, her routine changed. Her parents went out of town, and they told her she couldn’t go home. They told her she had to step out of her comfort zone and stay on campus.

After the initial shock of her routine being disrupted, Kimberly embraced it as an opportunity. She got to see and experience aspects of campus life she hadn’t up to that point. She spent time with friends outside of class and studying. She used school resources she didn’t have time to use during the week. She also saw parts of the college town she hadn’t

seen before. Kimberly enjoyed her new routine so much she didn't go home again until Christmas (much to her mom's surprise). She had tunnel vision and fear, like many of us do when we are experiencing new situations, that held her to her comfortable routine. Once Kimberly decided to treat change as an adventurous opportunity for growth, she was hooked on treating change as an opportunity in all arenas of her life.

Kimberly became a real estate agent soon after graduation. She took all the necessary exams and joined an agency in a town where she knew no one and did not know the market. Everything was going really well, but just a few years later, she started to feel burnt out and uninspired. She told herself it was a normal feeling everyone experienced once they were truly settled into a job, and she didn't think much of it.

Then one day, Kimberly went to a bookstore. She went seeking a book with a remedy for her recurring burnt-out feeling, and a book title caught her eye. She read the description on the back to see if it could help her situation. The description mentioned being a coach. This sparked a thought that captured her attention: "What would it be like to be a coach instead of a real estate agent?" This thought ignited some much-needed inspiration and creativity for her to ponder. She told me she began to wonder about that change, and she kept circling back to that thought over the course of the next few years.

Five years passed. Kimberly was still selling real estate, making good money, and enjoying the routine that spoke to her homebody roots. She took a real estate training course with a company in California that she really enjoyed. She later heard that same company had created a real estate agent

coaching program. The training company had seen how impactful business coaching could be and thought a tailored coaching experience for real estate agents could boost their effectiveness and give them an edge over their competitors. The word coach rang out to Kimberly, and she decided to sign up to be coached, which ultimately led to her being offered a coaching position.

Kimberly didn't hesitate at the opportunity to change course by becoming a coach for real estate agents. She experienced the coaching firsthand as a part of her training, then she began the training to become a coach for others. She set and achieved several goals along the way, and now twenty years later, she's still coaching and loving it! She credits her "harness-the-opportunity" approach for her success and happiness over that time. "I did not hesitate, and I did it afraid," she told me in our interview after conveying her story.

Kimberly's enthusiasm and positivity surrounding her approach to change is energizing. She's up for trying anything and everything because she strives to see all change, big or small, as an opportunity. This doesn't mean it's easy. She still has to work through it, and she is still afraid every now and then. "If you're doing something big, there will naturally be some trepidation. You'll never get to a place where you are totally comfortable with change," said Kimberly. There will always be a level of challenge.

Change doesn't have to be drastic, scary, or dramatically life changing. It is a natural part of a successful, well-lived life. You also don't have to be a celebrity, CEO, or have thousands of followers on social media for your change to be important

and/or hard. We all go through change, and we can all learn something from others, even our friendly, hometown real estate agent coach.

I believe too many people resist changes in their lives because they go into it feeling like they have no control over it and there's no hope of making it successfully. This perpetuates the “resist mind-set,” and then they get stuck in a negative cycle, never fully making the change. It's a fallacy, though. Change is an opportunity to be harnessed! There is hope for change with the right mind-set.

Successful change is a skill set. There are pieces and parts to it you can hone over time so you will be happier and more successful with each change you harness. In the chapters to come, I'll tell you about some skills you can use. Some of these skills and processes may sound familiar—setting goals, networking, having an accountability partner, and more. I'm a big believer in learning from trailblazers. Awesome people who came before me identified many of the key pieces to successful change. What will be different in this book than those before it is how I'll tie all of those skills together. I will link these highly effective skills into a mental playbook you can lean on every time an opportunity for change presents itself in your life. Now that you have this playbook, all you have to do is practice and implement—and you can start right now with any change you are facing.

The skills aren't the only pieces linked together in this book. I also want you to realize life changes aren't stand-alone events. You will make dozens of major and minor changes over the course of your life that, if done mindfully, will lead you to

who you ultimately want to become. Each time a change opportunity comes up, it is also an opportunity to shape your ultimate reality, or as I like to call it, your living room when you're eighty.

I decided to write this book because the process of change fascinates me. I've undergone so many changes I sometimes identify as a chameleon. Change has taken me from small town island girl to big city living in New Orleans, then later from a military academy student delivering cargo around the world by ship to flying Navy P-8/A Poseidons (a military version of the most common commercial airplane used around the world—the 737—so if you've ever flown, you've probably ridden on one). Though I have worked to harness all of my changes, I know others who've had the same opportunities who have not navigated their courses as successfully. I began wondering why my methods yielded results consistent with my objectives. I put my coaching mind to work, asking big questions to unravel the differences between my process and that of others.

I'll be presenting some of the questions that guided my exploration throughout each chapter. I encourage you to reflect on these with an open and honest mind. No one is grading your answers to the questions, and unless you tell someone, no one is even going to know you thought about them. Look at these questions as your personal pathway to self-development so you can fully examine any change you're going through or thinking about making. Though some of the verbiage may seem corporate, you do not have view change from a career perspective for this book to apply to you. Substitute the language that applies best to your unique change in those instances so the question resonates authentically with you.

Harnessing change as an opportunity, like I learned to and like Kimberly did, involves a growth mind-set along with tangible skills and processes to ensure you stay the course. Hearing stories of others that can serve as motivation and encouragement is another key to success when change is involved. The stories in this book are of regular people who've walked through changes that should feel relatable to you. This was really important to me. I want these stories to sound like what you or someone you know have gone through. No millionaire TikTok stars here. (Okay, maybe a couple celebrity appearances because who doesn't love a good pop culture reference?) Though some names have been shortened or changed to protect privacy, the majority of the people these vignettes will introduce you to are my friends, family members, neighbors, school mates, and people of my community. I'm sharing their stories here to inspire you to take charge of your change and become the most genuine version of yourself you can envision.

If you're going through a job transition, shifting family dynamic, if you're moving, starting/stopping/restarting school, beginning a new sport, lifestyle, or anything in between, this book and the harnessing change approach therein will positively impact your journey. Take encouragement from all of these stories and use them to build your change skills. Store the lessons they reveal and draw from those the next time you encounter a change that seems intimidating at first. Spend some time with the questions I'll present throughout the chapters to order your steps and make sure you're digging into the root of your decisions. With these examples, skills, and questions in your tool kit, you'll see your next change as an opportunity to be your most successful one yet.

CHAPTER 1

WHY WE RESIST CHANGE

*I have a big fear of change, or
negative change, anyway.*

—KELLY CLARKSON

Close your eyes, open all of your senses, and imagine popping the tab to a bubbly, crisp, sweet Coca-Cola. Hear the sound of the small burst of pressurized air rushing free, feel your hand gripping the chilled iconic red and white can as you bring it to your lips for a big gulp on a hot summer day. Ahhhhhhhh . . . refreshing. You probably didn't even pay much attention to the act of purchasing this can. You know exactly what it looks like after years of seeing it in the vending machine lineup, the cooler section of the store, or in the bright red cardboard box in the soda aisle. I bet if I asked you, you could draw it from memory. At least, you could have drawn it, until one day during the fall of 2011 when it all briefly changed.

Where did the red can go? What is this new, polar bear white can all about? Is it the same Coca-Cola? Or is it something new? What was wrong with the old stuff? How could they do this to me, change my Coca-Cola experience out of the blue?

Turmoil in the stores and ferocious pushback on the internet gripped the United States when Coca-Cola rolled out what the marketing team believed would be a well-received holiday-themed color scheme update. “It was the first time in 125 years that Coke changed its can color. And it didn’t go over too well,” read a headline in *Time* magazine (Carbone, 2011).

It didn’t go over well because the majority of people’s initial reaction to any change will be resistance. We have all been conditioned over years of seeing and experiencing Coca-Cola as a red can to know what to expect when we take that first sip. Thanks to modern, repeatable manufacturing processes, you know for certain what it will taste like, smell like, how it will make you feel, and exactly how long it will take you to drink the entire can. You control that experience, and it feels safe. Our brains have evolved to like safety and certainty. We like these two feelings so much we strive to recreate them as often as possible. According to neuroscientists Derler and Ray in *Why Change Is So Hard—and How to Deal With It*, this process of recreating safety and certainty allows us to control our environments and have more predictability in our daily lives.

Change does not feel safe. Any change, great or small, lacks certainty. No matter how hard you work to instill certainty into any change, there will always be a level of unpredictability. The marketing team at Coca-Cola undoubtedly worked

to envision every possible outcome for the launch of their white cans, but they failed to predict the consumer's neurological response.

Our initial resistant response often outwardly manifests itself in negative emotions or negative statements like the ones we've all heard before such as: Change is scary. Change is hard. You can't control change, and many more statements. "We tell ourselves that the change will be *difficult* (hard to do, complicated, awkward), *costly* (time-consuming, damaging to us or our reputation), and/or *weird* (not how people act, not what's expected). When we tell ourselves these things, it makes the change seem foolish or even dangerous . . . It automatically sets us up to resist or even sabotage the change" (Andersen, 2019). Rumors erupted nearly instantaneously about the liquid in the white Coca-Cola cans. It must be a new recipe the company was experimenting with, and the original, time-honored, beloved version was gone forever. *Gasp!* Stress and fear gripped consumers. Coca-Cola received so many negative, resistant, anxious comments that the white cans were recalled and the whole marketing plan was scrapped in just one month.

Coaching Question: *Think about the nature of a change you are going through (i.e., new job, back to work, school, retirement, family dynamic change, etc.). Picture yourself there, in the new role. Imagine all the minute details down to colors, smells, and feel of the new desk chair, car, home, country, and so on. Doing this will help you consider any areas where you feel a lack of safety and certainty. With these identified, you can work to overcome those feelings.*

STRESS-FEAR-ANXIETY CYCLE

Think about a time you were on your way to your local grocery store, office, child's school, favorite restaurant, or some other routine place and you encountered a detour in your typical route. What was your immediate reaction? Was it something akin to, "Well shoot, how long will this set me back? Where the heck will this take me? Is this going to be a permanent thing? Uuuugh." We've all been there and thought those kinds of thoughts about changes of all sizes. Change, whether it's anticipated or not, can initially appear to be inconvenient, frustrating, time-consuming, and several other negative adjectives.

Unexpected changes filled with uncertainty are notorious for igniting a resistance mind-set, but anticipated change can seem just as challenging. I vividly remember the day I moved out of my college dorm room (we called them barracks rooms because of the military lingo we applied to every aspect of our lives at the US Merchant Marine Academy). My 2004 gunmetal gray Mustang was loaded to the point of bulging at the door seams with all of my worldly possessions, and my room was bare. I did four or five final checks of all the drawers, the wardrobe, under the bed, under the mattress, behind the door, and everywhere else before continuing to delay my exit by standing on the threshold, paralyzed by the thought of leaving.

It was over. I was standing at the edge of what felt like a bottomless crevasse between my known, comfortable college life and the next big step that would usher me into the rest of my life. I'd planned for the day I'd move on from college. I'd done my best to anticipate all of the fear-inducing

uncertainty. I'd worked through all the good processes and asked all the big questions to make sure I'd set myself up for success. Still, I was immobilized. The stress, fear, and anxiety of the unknown in my mind at that moment had me feeling unsafe and overwhelmed.

This was a huge change, and despite spending literally years preparing for the day I would put college in my rearview mirror for the last time, I was frozen. Would I fit in as a Naval Officer? The piece of paper I received with my US Merchant Marine Academy diploma commissioning me as an officer said I was qualified, but would I *fit in*? Would I make the cut to be a pilot? I'd passed the initial test, but that's just the first hurdle! Would I be any good at flying? Had I done enough training to not look foolish on day one? I was succumbing to the classic cycle of stress and fear created by a lack of certainty and safety.

All changes, great and small, are stressful and have the potential to produce a vicious stress and fear cycle. Tonja Blom and Rica Viljoen of the University of South Africa and University of Reading, respectively, presented their findings on how humans react to change at a conference in 2016. In it, they describe this hallmark pitfall to change in the most succinct way I've heard: "Stress creates fear, which creates more stress, which then creates anxiety and resistance, which again results in increased fear and stress. This stress, anxiety, fear, and resistance cycle is fueled by the individual's away responses" (Blom & Viljoen, 2016).

Coaching Question: *Is the change you are making one that you chose? If not, how can you frame it in*

a positive light to help reduce the stress-fear-anxiety cycle? Writing it down in a positive way and committing to viewing it in this new light will give you back some control of this process.

YOUR BRAIN ON CHANGE

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America ran a public service announcement (PSA) campaign in the late 1980s and into the 1990s called “Frying Pan.” A man shows you a regular, white breakfast egg, stating, “This is your brain.” He then motions to a large, empty frying pan. As he says, “This is your brain on drugs,” he cracks the egg into the pan where it then begins to congeal and cook. This PSA was hailed by *TV Guide* as one of the top one hundred commercials of all time. It simply explained how your brain reacts to illicit substances, and the ad has spawned several spin-offs and parodies, ensuring its lesson endures (Alexander, 2000).

Similarly, your brain on change is a liquid mess. Maybe not to full fried breakfast egg consistency, as demonstrated in the “Frying Pan” PSA, but at least a sunny-side up version. As previously discussed, your brain will more often than not perceive change as a stressor. This triggers your amygdala—the lizard part of your brain that has yet to evolve fully and determines your emotions. Your amygdala interprets the outside stimulation signal and delivers its assessment to the hypothalamus (Harvard Health, 2020). The hypothalamus is a bit like a recorded phone menu of options that controls your central nervous system. It has scripted responses depending on what signal is sent to it from your amygdala.

Change is a stressor. So when your amygdala is stimulated by impending change, it tells the hypothalamus you are in distress. The hypothalamus reacts according to its scripted auto-response list like the good little recorded menu it is. Its first action is to flood your body with adrenaline like the egg dropping into the hot pan. This will cause several physical changes to your body (elevated heart rate, increased blood pressure, sweating, and increased breathing, to name a few). All of these physical changes are uncomfortable, so of course, you want to resist them and get out of it as soon as possible. Meanwhile, your thinking is altered too. You become hyper focused on what caused so much stress. You can't work through any other problems that come your way while in this state of adrenaline-fueled cooking. You can train your brain to react differently. Over time, your body can recognize change as an opportunity to harness and use the change to propel you forward *toward* who you want to be instead of *away* from the stress and perceived threat.

Coaching Question: *When have you felt this state of intense stress? Identify all the physical and emotional feelings you had in that state of stress. Are you feeling any of those now, or do you foresee the potential for them as you are thinking about the change you are making or will make?*

AWAY AND TOWARD

The Coca-Cola can, an unexpected detour, and leaving college probably sound like small changes, totally easy to accept and move past. You may be wondering, “Sure, but what about the really hard, out-of-the-blue stuff like losing my job or

suddenly having to take care of a loved one?” Both of those scenarios are indeed initially much scarier and will challenge your amygdala. My friend Harriet once found herself facing both of those big changes within months of each other.

All Harriet could hear was beeping. The doctor was standing right in front of her describing the past six hours of surgical procedures in detail. She could see the doctor’s lips moving, but she heard nothing except the beeping. Her husband of forty years was lying in a hospital bed six feet away, cut open from throat to belly button. From where they were standing, she could see the nearly three-foot-long incision, only loosely closed with plastic wrap just in case they needed to “jump back in to massage his heart” again.

Harriet knew Mike had a major cardiac episode. She knew he was alive only because of the more than a dozen machines that had to keep beeping. She also knew her life was going to change because of all of it. She started to make out snippets of the statements the doctors and nurses said over the next few hours: heart pump, left ventricular assist device (LVAD), heart transplant, waiting list, rehabilitation. Her vocabulary expanded to include all the new terms, and her mind began to form a loose timeline. The beeping, though, it blared loudest and kept her in a semi-constant state of being overwhelmed and resistant. “I just want to go home and come back and have everything back to normal,” she told me in the cold, hushed cardiac ward’s waiting room over lukewarm coffee and generic turkey sandwiches from the cafeteria.

Their lives will never go back to normal. This “out-of-the-blue change” upended their routine and forced them to create a

new normal. Like most of us do when confronted with spontaneous, unwanted change, they resisted it. Harriet tried to go back to work. Mike tried to recover by himself at home. It became clear after a few weeks and a couple of panicked calls from Mike to Harriet's work while he was waiting on an ambulance to pick him up that their pre-event normal would no longer work. Harriet needed to make two difficult, big changes. She needed to quit her job, and she needed to become Mike's caregiver, at least until the initial aftereffects of Mike's new normal had become routine and manageable.

The overwhelming senses of frustration, defeat, and fear all balled up into one messy clump of emotions in Harriet's stomach. This was not a change she'd ever foreseen. She loved working. The sense of purpose and accomplishment she derived from it put a smile on her face just thinking about it. She tried to think of any way she could continue to work and be Mike's caregiver at the same time but came up empty.

She told me, "Acceptance was the hardest part," but once she overcame that, she was able to put the puzzle together. She was able to see the positives this could lead to, like more time together and more time with other family members, home improvement projects they'd been meaning to do, and other small life-improving changes like diet, exercise, and hobbies. Once she'd moved past the fear, the silver lining started to shine.

Harriet naturally resisted these big life changes. Who could blame her? Watching your loved one go through such an enormous trauma is enough to make anyone step back in shocked fear. Having the ripple effects of that change dictate

the life you'd worked so hard to establish and leaned on for meaning and direction is distressing even to imagine. Harriet's initial reaction was wanting to physically move away from the change by going home, a familiar place. Resisting change is the mind's method of attempting to move you away from the perceived threat. I can imagine anyone in a similar situation to Harriet's would feel the ball of emotions that she did and resist their change. We resist change, especially if we don't feel in control.

Does it have to be like this? Does your first reaction to change have to be a resisting, away response, or is a better way of approaching change available to you? Can you move toward changes in your life to make them positive experiences? Absolutely! Blom and Viljoen, who detailed the stress-fear-anxiety cycle, also describe "away" and "toward" responses in their research. "Away responses" are what come from the resistance reaction most people initially have about change, whereas "toward responses" come from positive reactions and what I call a harnessing change approach (Blom & Viljoen, 2016). This harnessing approach is how people skip the stress cycle, make successful changes in their lives, and increase their happiness about the path before them.

Harriet eventually started to use the harnessing approach tools she'd learned from previous life changes to chart her journey through this new life change of being a full-time caregiver. She started to ask big questions, set goals, lean on her network for the support she needed, and take an active role so she had a sense of control in the whirlwind. Today Harriet is an active gardener, has tackled most of her home projects list, does light office work on occasion, and

continues to approach the new changes life brings her with a “toward” response.

The skills Harriet found critical, and many more, are the focus of part two of this book! Through several more stories, you’ll learn these skills and how they can help you successfully harness change in your life. The key to having a “toward” response and mastering the harnessing change approach is a growth mind-set. So, before we dive into how to retrain your lizard brain and the skills you’ll need, let’s first examine what a growth mind-set means and why you should have one.

Coaching Question: *What are the other changes that have to take place alongside your main change (like Harriett having to leave her job)? Most changes come in sets. Thinking through them early will encourage your brain to choose a harnessing approach.*

APPENDIX

INTRODUCTION

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