

How to Change Your Life for the Better (Without Freaking Out About It)

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Change is ~exhilarating~.

Science shows change stimulates your brain, broadens your perspective, and boosts your performance. And if you make it at the most unexpected times—when your job, your workout, and your relationships are running smoothly—change can be especially powerful. "It opens the door to exciting new opportunities, which takes your skills to the next level and shows you that you can handle challenges," says K. Anders Ericsson, Ph.D., a coauthor of *Peak: Secrets From the New Science of Expertise*. "Positive change puts you in control of your life."

And it prevents you from getting stuck.

Take your job: After a year or so, you feel a steadiness and a sense of competency that is reassuring and comforting, Ericsson says. Gradually, though, your work can start to feel routine, even stifling. At that point, change becomes a scramble, an urgent attempt to get out of your hole. But if you make some tweaks (take on new responsibilities, special projects, or even a new job) while at your peak of performance, you'll be doing it from a prime position of mental strength and confidence. This type of forward-moving change—a life shift—will help you evolve, grow, and succeed.

But getting started isn't always easy or obvious. You need some eye-openers. This five-point strategy will help you ID when you need that shift most and how to overcome any potential obstacles in your way.

1. Take stock.

"The most successful and happiest people are constantly evaluating themselves and their circumstances and looking to make tweaks that will help them grow," says Laura Vanderkam, a productivity expert and the author of *I Know How She Does It*. "When life has been good for a while, ask yourself, *What am I doing on auto-pilot?* Ironically, when things are going well, your days can become routine and mindless, and you can start to disengage mentally and emotionally."

That's when you need a shake-up. Say you love your treadmill-dumbbell-stretch circuit at the gym. This is the perfect time to step things up and try a workout that has always intrigued but daunted you. Challenging yourself this way will inject new excitement and energy into your fitness routine and can help you discover strengths you never knew you had.

2. Flip your thinking.

The number-one thing that holds people back from pursuing positive, productive life shifts is doubt, Vanderkam says. We think, *What if it doesn't work out? What if the change makes things worse?* The solution: Tell yourself that you are firmly in control. "Changes are inevitable. But when you take charge and manage change on your terms, it's going to work out in the best possible way for you," Vanderkam says. This approach helps take away the fear of uncertainty and makes you feel more optimistic and empowered.

3. Ask questions often.

When making a change, we often don't know much about what we're getting ourselves into, and we can be hesitant to find out. It's time to get over that. Come right out and ask people who have what you want exactly how they got it, Ericsson says. If you enjoy hearing your coworker talk about all the exotic places she visits on vacation, tell her that—then ask how she chooses the destinations, finds good deals, and plans her trips. You may not get a life-shifting insight from every person you question, but the nuggets you do glean will be well worth it, Ericsson says.

4. Start small at first...

One major perk of making a change when things are going well is that you benefit from even tiny tweaks. "Small changes keep you moving forward," Vanderkam says. For instance, take that weekend photography class you've always wanted to try; invite your friends to a museum exhibit or an art show. Think about what doors that would open for you—maybe you'll discover a new skill or find a pastime that energizes and inspires you.

5. Then hit full throttle.

Experts used to advise making one change at a time to avoid getting burned out. But there are advantages to switching up everything at once, according to research in the journal *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. In the study, scientists had people overhaul their daily routines—they started exercising twice a day, getting more sleep, practicing mindfulness, and attending wellness lectures while cutting back on alcohol and processed foods. Compared with other studies in which people made only one change to their routines, the participants' moods and stress levels improved more than twice as much.

The takeaway: We're more flexible and adaptable than we think, the study's authors say. "People underestimate what they can really do," Vanderkam says. As long as you focus on shifts that feel manageable, there's no limit on the number of changes you can make.