

## Introduction

I first wrote this article at the request of New Living Magazine. It elaborates on one of the chapters of my new book *The Art of Changing: Your Path to a Better Life*.

### Stumbling Blocks to Change

For years, I taught a self-help course at my local adult school. At the end of the class, I always passed out a list of self-help books. Inevitably, at least one student would raise her hand and say, "I have read most of these books, and they don't help. I don't know what I'm doing wrong." Speaking to these students after class, I often discovered that they were stuck because they didn't understand one fundamental truth -- our lives don't get better when we read a book or go to a class; our lives get better when we put forth the effort to change.

Change is not only the solution to many of our problems, it is a natural process from which we get a feeling of self-worth and well-being. It feels good to change because we intuitively know this is the only way to reach our full potential.

Despite the importance of change, it is not always easy. There are countless stumbling blocks. Understanding these stumbling blocks is the first step in breaking them down and moving them out of the way.

**Denial and Defense Mechanisms:** Many times, we can't change because we adamantly deny that there is anything about us that needs to be changed. Denial is usually a defense mechanism. A defense mechanism is anything we think, say, or do to manage the feelings we want to avoid. Sometimes even our feelings are defense mechanisms against other feelings. For instance, I get angry to avoid fear and blame others for my problems to keep the fear at bay. Breaking through denial happens when we are ready. Sometimes quietly, and sometimes in the middle of great chaos, we have a moment of clarity. Then we remember something that someone told us years before, but we were afraid to acknowledge. Perhaps this will happen when we wake up one morning. Sadly, for those less fortunate, it will happen when a judge sentences them to a life in prison. During these moments, we will open our eyes and acknowledge the truth about our situation.

**Perfectionism:** We do not know if perfectionists are born or made. I know I have always been driven by some inner compulsion to do things over and over again until I get them "just right." Something deep within me gets great satisfaction from this. On the other hand, I remember my mother saying, "If it is worth doing, it is worth doing right." Perhaps trying to please her is also a part of my perfectionism. Whether perfectionism is good or bad, I do know it can be a stumbling block to change if we can't move forward because we are afraid of making mistakes. If you struggle with perfectionism, try to treat yourself as you would an eager child who presents you with his first drawing. Would you point out the flaws or would you praise her for the precious gift she has

presented to you? Your efforts to change are just as precious and worthy of praise.

**Fear:** Fear is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to change because most of us are afraid of the unknown. Fear usually manifests itself as something else like ambivalence or denial. Fear also sends us all kinds of negative messages like, “What if things get worse instead of better?” “What if I fail?” “What if I succeed and I can’t handle the responsibilities?” To deal with our fear, we must make a decision and move forward. Even if it is the wrong decision, it is better than doing nothing. Moving forward by trial and error is a legitimate way to change. There are several helpful expressions that describe this: “feel the fear and do it anyway,” “act as if,” and “fake it ‘til you make it.”

**Bonding:** We often bond with our bad habits. The intimacy we create with the person we *have always been* is hard to give up. When it is time to change, we must grieve the loss of who they we were yesterday. Many of us cannot bear any form of loss and the grief that goes with it. It is much easier to just remain the same and never change. Grieve if you have to, but move on.

**Emotional Problems:** Depression, shame, low self-esteem and other emotional problems act like a wet blanket smothering the desire to change. They make us tired and apathetic. They sap us of enthusiasm and the energy we need to change. All of these things can be treated with therapy and support groups. I recommend both.

**Addiction:** Nothing stands in the way of change as much as addiction. Addiction is all about holding on to mood-altering experiences and dangerous rituals at the expense of change, even when the changes are necessary to save your life. If you are to change, you must first treat your addictions.

Whatever stumbling blocks stand between you and change, tackle them one by one, and become the person you were meant to be. And remember this: “Change is to human life what the metamorphosis is to the caterpillar. It is the inevitable cycle of life. If there is not change, there is no life.”

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