

A Little Guidebook
for
Pragmatic Change

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INTRODUCTION

This book begins with a basic premise: that human beings have an extraordinary ability to change. Some people might have a more natural talent for it than others, but we all have it, and we can all make use of it. The second basic premise is that a lot of meaningful change can be accomplished by taking small and consistent steps.

Both of those premises are worth thinking over for a moment. It can be a stretch of the imagination, particularly when we are feeling stuck, to think that we have the power to change ourselves and our lives. There are all sorts of things that we come to accept as inevitable as the years go by. So any assertion that there is some sort of inherent change-making power within us may stir up a bit of natural skepticism.

This is why the second premise is important, and why I set out to write a book about change that emphasizes a pragmatic approach. There is no shortage of outsized claims in the self-improvement marketplace today, promising personal transformation, love, fulfillment, success and riches. Many of these claims make it sound like it is going to be easy: if you just buy this book, or take this workshop, or enroll in this course, everything will change and you will have extraordinary results! After engaging with a few of these inflated claims, it is easy to get discouraged and eventually cynical about the whole idea.

I'm not going to tell you that change will be easy – only that it is possible and doable. I'm also not going to claim that making big changes is for everyone. Some people who pick up this book may be content with the overall shape of their lives and read it looking for a few tools to deal with a few specific, if relatively minor, issues. Others may turn to these pages because they are facing enormous challenges or want to make a major life overhaul. Whether you are looking to change a few small things or to embark on a much longer journey of redesigning your life, this book will help you get grounded, get organized, and begin to move forward one manageable step at a time.

You may have noticed in browsing the table of contents that these chapters cover a lot of ground, from the basics of goal-setting to harnessing imagination, developing communication skills, and beyond. This broad approach stems from the third basic premise of the book: that all the different parts of your life are inter-connected. Your personal life and your professional life have an impact on each other. Your friendships and relationships don't exist in a vacuum completely separate from your career or health and fitness goals. While some amount of compartmentalization in life is inevitable, it is an illusion to think we can completely separate all of these different aspects of our lives.

This idea of recognizing the greater whole is what is meant by the word *holistic*. For some, that word carries mystical connotations, but in this case, I'm really using it pragmatically: your life forms a complex whole and it is important not to lose sight of the big picture when you get to work on the details. Maybe one of the reasons Mary struggles with her career goals is because she is not really dealing with her social or emotional issues. We may be reluctant to admit that both social and emotional factors can play a huge role in determining how our professional efforts pan out. We don't always talk about this – “emotional intelligence” and “social dynamics” are usually not taught as courses in school – so it can be genuinely confusing when these factors end up throwing us off track.

And the opposite can also be true: our sense of emotional wellness and the quality of our relationships can absolutely be affected by issues around work and career. Perhaps Paul's sense of frustration in his marriage is related to an unspoken lack of fulfillment and greater purpose in his life. If not a new career, perhaps Paul needs a service project or creative outlet to feel more secure and satisfied in himself, which will allow him to show up more fully and authentically for his marriage and family.

These sorts of dynamics are not always going to be present, but in diagnosing a problem and formulating a solution, it is important to consider all the factors at play in your current situation – including the ones outside the box! And to do this, we need to be able to balance the details of your particular problems with the big picture of your life.

We're all unique in this regard; we all have a unique self and a unique path through life. And part of finding clarity in that path is getting clear on this: what do you really want, and why? Not everybody else's agenda for you – not the stories about yourself you picked up as a kid – I'm talking about getting down to the core of who you are. When you bring that kind of inner alignment into the mix, the path ahead naturally begins to emerge.

Whether you believe you have found your path or are still seeking it out, substantial progress can be made through a process of relatively simple steps, provided you approach them with commitment and consistency. Even if you personally struggle with commitment and constancy, you can still move forward with a clear goal of learning to become more committed and consistent, and pursuing *that* goal in small actionable steps, until you are ready to move on to whatever is next. There is always some small action to be taken, and over time those small actions can change the course of your life.

By taking change-making out of the realm of outsized claims, explosive shifts and total transformations promised by the self-help industry, we can get down to the real work of developing specific strategies tailored to who you are as a unique individual. This is what I mean when I talk about being pragmatic: finding a plan of action that is both *doable* and works for *you*.

Google's dictionary defines *pragmatic* as “dealing with things sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations.” This means getting real both about what you want and the obstacles you face – including those obstacles that are entirely within your own psyche – and looking for concrete steps that you can take, within the scope of your current resources, to start making change.

Of course, if personal transformation all came down to nothing more than a skill for goal-setting and taking small steps, we would all probably be much further along. There are a number of forces, both within us and in the world outside, that heavily influence the outcome of our plans. Things can get complicated. Again, developing strategies that work means having a good grasp of the problem in all its aspects, including the larger context of your life. If psychological factors can impact your results, it's only pragmatic to address those factors from the start. The chapters ahead will address these concerns, and many others, head-on. Together, they offer a tool kit for making progress across a several different dimensions of your life.

How to Use This Book

This guidebook is organized as a collection of inter-related essays that together serve as a handy reference guide for the different aspects of making change. While the later chapters do

build on earlier chapters to some extent, each chapter is also meant to stand alone. Depending on what your current goals and challenges are, some topics may be more useful to you right now than others, and it's fine to leave the less relevant ones for a rainy day.

Above all, I encourage you to use this book pragmatically - that is, read it in a way that works for *you*. For some readers, starting at the beginning and moving dutifully to the end will give you a broad and satisfying overview of new options and approaches for your life. But don't feel obligated to do it that way. Someone really struggling with goals, habits and focus might read Chapters 2 & 3 on goals and neuroplasticity, and then skip to Chapter 9 on creativity, resistance, and discipline. Someone else struggling with their personal relationships might read Chapters 4 and 5 on emotion and accepting support, and then skip to Chapter 8 on communication. Or if you want some insight into a broader re-visioning of your life, maybe start with Chapter 1 on positive thinking, then move on to Chapter 6 on imagination and Chapter 9 on creativity, and finally have a look at the Chapter 12 on service. Think of it as a choose-your-own-adventure for personal development. Follow your curiosity through the topics that resonate for you, and when you've gotten what you need, get out there and start making change!

Here's a quick outline of what's to come:

Part 1, Foundations of Change, goes over the basics for anyone who wants to begin to make some changes in their life. Chapter 1 begins with a frank discussion about both the benefits and potential dangers of working with "positive thinking." Chapter 2 goes over the essentials of identifying and prioritizing your goals, formulating plans, and working with an accountability system to stay on track. Chapter 3 gets into the basic principles of brain change (neuroplasticity) that have emerged in recent decades, and offers tips for how to engage with this natural process deliberately and effectively. Chapter 4 brings in the emotional dimension, and outlines the ways emotion can both help and hinder our plans and progress. Finally, Chapter 5 goes over the importance of finding social support and building healthy relationships – including when to take the option of working with a professional therapist or coach to accelerate your progress. Together these chapters form a basic blueprint for change-making endeavors of all kinds, from the personal to the professional. Depending on where you are in your development, some of the content in these early chapters may seem overly simple to you and you might want to skim or skip ahead. On the other hand, there is sometimes much to be gained by reviewing basics with a beginner's mind.

Each chapter in Part 1 is followed by a Pragmatics section which distills and recapitulates some of the main ideas of the chapter into basic action steps. These can serve as a quick go-to when you are getting started with something new, or need a reminder if your process has begun to stall.

Part 2, Advanced Change-Making, covers a variety of more complex topics for further development after the basic foundations are in place. Chapter 6 focuses on the power of imagination, not just in creativity but in all aspects of life. This chapter makes the argument that imagination is one of the most under-used resources in the world today, something that just about everyone could benefit from further developing. Chapter 7 turns to look at our interior psychological obstacles, including the phenomenon of self-sabotage, and offers some techniques for recognizing and working through these problems. Chapter 8 shifts back to the external world of relationships, and focuses on developing essential communication skills for both personal and professional life. Chapter 9 take on cultivating creativity and dealing with the natural resistance that often keeps our creative energies locked away. Creativity here is not just about making art – it is about anything new that you want to bring into the world.

Chapter 10 takes a step back from the focus on achievement and instead explores the benefits of self-acceptance, slowing down, and practicing appreciation and gratitude. While not very sexy, these are skills that can really sustain you in the long run, especially after a rough patch. Chapter 11 is perhaps the most complex, with a psychological focus on discovering who you really are as an individual and accessing and expressing the many different parts of yourself – even the parts you did not know existed. Finally, Chapter 12 brings the book to a close by focusing on the importance of being of service to the world, and offering some guidance for finding the best ways that you can give back.

Again, depending on where you are in your own personal journey, some of these chapters may be more useful to you than others. If you are struggling with basic goal-setting and accountability this year, some of the later chapters may only complicate the issue and might be best saved for the next stage of your journey. On the other hand, each chapter offers a variety of practical tips and insights for getting more out of life, so if you are feeling especially stuck, taking a broader view and covering more ground might help generate some useful new ideas.

I wrote this guidebook to be as accessible as possible, easy to pick up and read while offering plenty to ponder and practice after you put it down. Perhaps because I began work on the book so soon after completing my very dense doctoral dissertation, I approached this project with a more casual, conversational style, as if you were sitting in the room with me. This is particularly true of the early chapters, which are meant to go over the basics and have the widest applications. Some of the ideas in the later chapters get a bit more complex, which is in keeping with their placement as a more advanced leg of the journey. In any case, I encourage you to stay focused on whatever works for you.

In this spirit of keeping things easy and conversational, I have chosen not to include a citation (or reference) for every idea presented. In academic writing that kind of constant referencing is important, but I'm going for something more user-friendly here. Instead of including citations in the chapter themselves, I have included a bibliography in the back for those interested in doing more in-depth research into the topics covered (and to placate any skeptics who think I might just be making this stuff up!).

Many chapters will repeat some of the same themes: the power of belief and imagination, the importance of emotion, the basic formulation of goal setting, accountability, and persistence, and understanding the value of receiving support from others. From a holistic perspective, each of these topics are inevitably linked to each other. By cycling through them over several iterations, the repetition both supports the learning process and creates a greater framework for understanding how these pieces fit together in your life.

Another recurrent theme through this book is finding balance between extremes. Human beings have an unfortunate tendency toward polarized thinking – all or nothing. It is most obvious in our politics, but really you can find it anywhere. Take for example the topic of the first chapter – the idea of “positive thinking.” Many people will quickly take an idea like this to one extreme or another: positive thinking is the key to success, or positive thinking is delusional nonsense. The simple fact of the matter is that the truth lies in-between. Yes, positive thinking can be an incredibly useful tool, and yes, positive thinking can become totally delusional and counterproductive.

In this and in so many other areas of this book, I strive to find the balance and hold open that pragmatic in-between space where we recognize what works about an idea while remaining cautious about its pitfalls. Although this runs contrary to our natural polarizing tendencies, I believe developing a capacity for this kind of cognitive balancing act is among the most

powerful and useful thinking skills a person can develop. Ideas are only what we make of them, and finding the balance between extremes just means putting ideas in their place. Ideas should serve us – not the other way around!

There is no magic wand in this book. I won't tell you that you can snap your fingers and make all of your problems disappear. But I know this: as long as you draw breath and can think for yourself, you have the power to create change in your life. It may be difficult at times, and progress may be slow – but progress is always available to you. Whether the change you are making is something inside of you, or some part of your life on the outside, with patience, persistence, and focus, transformation is possible.

So let's begin.

PART I
FOUNDATIONS OF CHANGE

Whatever you think you can do or believe you can do, begin it. Action has magic, grace and power in it.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

CHAPTER 1
THE PROMISE AND PERILS
OF POSITIVE THINKING

Day by day, what you choose, what you think and what you do is who you become.

Heraclitus

The notion of positive thinking has been around for a long time – at least since the beginnings of Western civilization in Ancient Greece, and I imagine probably a lot longer. The basic idea goes something like this: If you think positive thoughts and visualize positive outcomes, this will result in better actual outcomes in your life. It has been voiced by different thinkers in different ways over the centuries. The most explosive instance I can remember is in 2006 when Rhonda Byrne published *The Secret*, which offered a take on positive thinking called “the law of attraction.” Essentially, Byrne claimed, what you think sends out signals to the “universe” and the universe responds by delivering what you are thinking about. The *Secret* was a huge financial success, selling over 20 million copies and topping the New York Time’s best seller list for over 100 weeks. It also generated tremendous backlash. Reading some of the articles written in response, it seemed there was a lot of outrage directed at Byrne for offering up such a simple take on human life. These critics argued that Byrne’s prescription was absurd, at best wishful thinking, at worst actively destructive to people’s lives.

I’m not going to get into the metaphysics of “the universe” in this book – I’ll leave that for others to duke out. To my eyes, the universe is a pretty darned complicated place and also pretty mysterious, and I have my doubts if human beings will ever be able to completely figure it out. If we want to figure something out, I suggest we have a much better prospect of learning to understand ourselves: human beings and human experiences. What are the pragmatic outcomes, good and bad, of engaging positive thinking, and why?

The truth is, there is both tremendous promise and great peril in the practice of positive thinking. It can be an excellent tool for creating desirable outcomes, but if mis-used it can delude us and keep us from doing the hard work that real change requires. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

Positive Thinking as a Tool for Change

One of the reasons positive thinking keeps arising over the centuries is the simple fact that on some level it works. Not necessarily in a metaphysical “law of attraction” sort of way, but in a pragmatic psychological sort of way. Imagine this example:

Lizzie is a college freshman with low self-esteem and mild social anxiety, stemming in part from feeling outcast and bullied by mean girls in high school. At her first week of college, Lizzie is invited to a party at her dorm. Based on her past experiences, her mind is flooded with negative thoughts: she won’t be welcomed, people won’t like her, she will be teased and

excluded. These thoughts swirl in her head as she enters the party. People smile at her, but she's afraid they are smiles of pity or mockery. When a boy comments on the color of her hair, she interprets it as an insult even though he did not mean it that way. She notices some girls laughing at the far end of the room and one of them glances in her direction. Lizzie assumes they are laughing at her clothes. The truth is, the girls were laughing about a funny thing they had seen on tv, and the girl who glanced across the room was looking at Lizzie out of curiosity – but Lizzie doesn't know that. As the night goes on, she begins to feel more insecure and anxious. Maybe she starts to drink alcohol to calm her nerves. In any case, she goes home alone and miserable, with one more sad story in her personal history about everything she imagines to be wrong with her and how hard it is to make friends.

And the worst part? By spending the evening in this anxious and avoidant state, she gives everyone at the party a bad first impression of her. Maybe now some people in her dorm will begin to think she is unfriendly or anti-social, and will continue to avoid her rather than making future overtures of friendship. Another downward spiral towards an unhappy social life begins, and Lizzie has no idea the degree to which she is contributing to the problem.

Now let's go back in time and imagine this history taking a different course. Over the summer before college, Lizzie starts working on thinking more positively. Maybe she read a book about positive thinking, or started working with a coach or therapist, or started spending time with some more upbeat and positive friends. When she shows up to the party that first week on campus, she still has all the same fears and anxieties – but now she's actively meeting them with positive thoughts and actively imagining positive outcomes. When people smile, she smiles back and says hello. When the boy talks about her hair, she makes a joke about it and compliments his eyebrow piercing. They have a good if slightly awkward conversation and he asks for her number. It may not be true love, but it still feels great that he's interested. When the girls across the room start laughing, she wonders what it is about and goes over to check it out. She's never heard of the TV show they are laughing about, and one of the girls invites her to come over and watch it sometime. Lizzie still feels nervous and sometimes awkward as the night goes on, but she's also meeting some interesting people and having a pretty good time. She goes home excited: the dark days of high school are behind her and a whole new world of possibilities has opened. It's the first step towards an enriching college social life.

All of the external events in these two examples are exactly the same; what changed was how Lizzie reacted to them. In the first example, her past experiences predisposed her to expect certain negative outcomes, and she managed to re-create them for herself unnecessarily. In the second, she was able to use positive thinking to re-orient herself to the possibility of positive outcomes in the present moment, and was able to accept those outcomes when they showed up.

Of course, it isn't always quite this easy. Sometimes someone in Lizzie's situation might need to do some deep emotional work in therapy to push through intense social anxiety. Furthermore, the sad truth is, however positively Lizzie thinks, she is still going to encounter mean, judgmental people from time to time. Nevertheless, the practice of thinking positive thoughts and imagining positive outcomes opens up a psychological space for good things to occur with greater frequency. It's a bit like setting your inner radar to detect opportunities. Doing so is never a guaranteed protection from things going wrong, but it sets the stage for things to go as right as possible.

This was primarily a social example, but the same basic principles apply to all walks of life: professional development, business ventures, passion projects, health and fitness, and all manner of personal goals. Practicing positive thinking may not be a magic wand to make good things

happen, but it creates a predisposition to recognize, accept and capitalize on whatever good we encounter. By cultivating our capacity for positive thinking, we are more prone to recognize and act on opportunities when they appear.

Positive thinking can also begin to take the sting out of negative experiences. If we are constantly on the lookout for the positive opportunity, negative encounters become distractions to move on from quickly, rather than disasters knocking us out of the sky. Let's say, in the example above, that Lizzie does encounter a nasty person at the party that openly mocks her. Will she take that to heart and let it ruin her night? Or is that unfortunate encounter just a few minutes of distraction from her mission of finding and connecting with the people who are good for her? It is up to Lizzie to choose what she wants to focus on. Likewise with a setback in business, or a day of binge eating while on a diet – in a negative mindset these events can become catastrophes, whereas to a positive thinker they are temporary obstacles on the road to success, and not worth dwelling on once their lessons have been learned.

There are other benefits as well: positivity can be a terrific motivating factor. Why get out of bed in the morning if you are convinced it is going to be a terrible day? Why go to that networking event if you keep telling yourself that you are terrible at networking? Imagining possibilities gets us out in search of them. We may not find exactly what we are looking for today, but we are holding open the space for that desired goal to arrive. Not trying for fear of failure is a terrific way to get nowhere.

Positive thinking helps to clarify and focus on what it is we really want. Vague goals are difficult to pursue. They leave us in danger of waiting for things to fall into place regardless of our actions. That kind of serendipitous alignment may happen occasionally, but more often than not we will be waiting and watching for quite a while. By envisioning a particular positive outcome that we are moving toward, we get specific and stay focused. All manner of strategies and fortitudes can arise from holding a positive vision in this manner.

The Shadow Side of Positivity

This all sounds great, doesn't it? What could possibly go wrong? The truth is, a whole lot. Positive thinking taken to the extreme can result in dissociation, delusion, and some really terrible decision making. If you believe all it takes to get what you want is thinking the right way, all sorts of real problems will get ignored while you are busy visualizing.

Let's say you've opened a new business and you are operating at a loss – another couple of months like this and you will be forced to close down shop. While positive thinking may be a helpful tool in managing this crisis, forcing yourself to *only* think happy thoughts about your business as it crumbles around you could very well end in tragedy. The truth is, acknowledging negative events and circumstances is often the first step to resolving them. Let's say in the example above the reason the business is failing is a combination of mediocre marketing and a poorly designed and confusing storefront. Step one to solving those problems is recognizing that there are indeed real concrete problems, and then taking concrete steps to address them. That means acknowledging that something bad is happening, that perhaps you have made mistakes, and figuring out a concrete strategy for fixing it. "Law of attraction" extremists live in danger of missing that crucial first step because they are afraid that acknowledging the problem would be "negative thinking" that will somehow "attract" more negativity.

This dynamic is even more true in the emotional dimension. Let's say after ten years of marriage a couple is having a real crisis around sex, intimacy, and communication. In the first place, acknowledging the problem and figuring out a strategy for fixing it is crucial. But here the roots may go even deeper. Perhaps the husband in this case has some old deep wounds around sexuality – shaming by his mother, abuse by an uncle or older children, a string of bad relationships with bad outcomes. This man has some work to do on himself and his past before he can show up fully in his marriage. And going into old wounds and past traumas is not easy – sometimes it feels like re-living the most painful episodes of our lives – episodes that we long ago secretly decided to suppress because they were so painful. Working with a gifted therapist or healer, this man may be able to finally look at these old issues and find healing. But that process begins by acknowledging the pain of the past.

Extreme positive thinking completely destroys this possibility for healing, because it won't acknowledge the wound. A couple addicted to positive thinking might not seek to fix the problems to begin with and instead live in denial, making each other miserable but refusing to consciously acknowledge the misery. If it comes to light that the husband has some unresolved past trauma, a refusal to face the negative dimensions of life means that those old wounds will never get addressed. Instead of healing, the traumas continue to fester beneath the surface, working their mischief and damaging our relationships in present time.

I've seen this dynamic play out in something as simple as a yoga class. Some years ago *The New York Times* ran a provocative article titled "How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body" by William Broad. In it, Broad detailed all sorts of injuries coming out of yoga classes at the time. As a yoga teacher myself, I was saddened to see that American yoga had gotten so far away from its roots as an ancient system for the transformation of consciousness. In my view, a healthy yoga practice begins with listening to the body, and that includes acknowledging pain and learning your limits. As we become more attuned to our bodies through consistent and mindful practice, we should ideally become better and better at recognizing when something is off. Unfortunately, the combination of athleticism and new age marketing in contemporary yoga drives many people to do just the opposite – force their bodies to do extreme things while ignoring the warning signals because they think they are somehow transcending the pain. And then they get hurt. An excess of positive thinking strikes again.

This ties into a larger phenomenon known as *spiritual bypass*. This term refers to the unfortunate tendency of some spiritual practitioners to use their spiritual practice or spiritual experiences as an escape route from dealing with the difficult things in life. I may be in an abusive relationship, but rather than get help, I'm going to meditate my way into transcendental bliss. I may be deeply in debt, totally financially disorganized and have no professional or career plan going forward, but I'm going to spend this month's paycheck on my tenth ayahuasca ceremony. I may be terribly lonely, but boy do I look impressive when I do yoga! I may not know how to talk to my children, but I am a pious follower of Jesus!

For the record, I am a big believer in spiritual practices of all kinds: they can be wonderful ways to expand our horizons beyond our small ego-identity, find a sense of connection with the world and cosmos, and enrich the meaning of our lives. But spirituality stops serving us when it becomes a means to avoid facing real problems or doing difficult work.

When I was in my early twenties I jumped into my dream of becoming a film-maker. I poured my heart and soul into the production of several projects, some of them quite lengthy. I worked on shoestring budgets, determined to make up for my lack of funds by sheer determination and work ethic. To say I had a lot of faith in this endeavor is an understatement –

it felt like a spiritual calling and I truly believed that if I just worked hard enough, the films would be successful. Sadly, I did not know anything about the machinations of the film industry as a business. I didn't know about marketing or distribution or PR. And so when I had just about burnt myself out giving the production and editing of these films my all, I was met with a brutal reality: I had neither a strategy nor the resources to get them into the marketplace. I might have course corrected if I had been willing to admit my mistakes, but at that time I was too wrapped up in a belief that working hard would automatically translate into results, and that a faithful attitude would win the day. In the end, I lost a lot of money and experienced a lot of heartbreak. I even went through something of an identity crisis, because what I had thought was my calling had been a failure. But the simple truth was, I was not prepared for the full breadth of what I took on, and I was not able to recognize and diagnose my own mistakes in time.

I've felt the lesson of that experience in my bones ever since: belief is important, but belief alone is not enough. And even a seemingly positive belief like "working hard wins the day" can become a trap when it crowds out more thoughtful and realistic assessments and strategies.

So it is with positive thinking. It can motivate and empower us; it can open up the space for new possibilities and send us out into the world to find them; it can bring us clarity and focus; it can prepare us to make the absolute most of every positive event or circumstance that comes our way; and it can help us re-frame negative events as distractions and temporary setbacks. But positive thinking will not, in itself, hand you your dreams on a silver platter.

To find what we seek in life, there is real work to be done. And I don't just mean the dedicated busy-work that burnt me out as a young film-maker. I mean also learning to work smarter, not just harder. And on a deeper level, there is also inner work to be done: the process of discovering, healing and empowering who you really are. These ideas, smarter work and inner work, will be examined further in the chapters to come.

Pragmatics: How to Establish a Positive Thinking Practice.

There are certain key factors for establishing any new habit or practice that will be outlined in the chapters ahead, including the importance of consistency, emotional valence, identifying unconscious obstacles, and working with supportive others. But for now, here are a few basics for getting yourself on a more positive track:

1. *Mindfulness.* The first step is to start to become more aware of your positive and negative thinking as you go through the day. Don't feel obligated to try to change every negative thought – this is more about laying groundwork for self-observation. If you find yourself having a negative thought about yourself or imagining a negative future, just make a mental note. Likewise when you notice yourself thinking something self-affirming or imagining a good outcome, make a mental note of that. One of the most wonderful things about the human brain is that it gets better with practice, so the more you practice noticing positive and negative thinking, the better you will get at catching yourself.
2. *Remind Yourself.* Since we're all busy people with all sorts of things demanding our attention, some of us may benefit from visual, auditory, or tactile reminders. For example, a note over your bathroom mirror or in your wallet that reads "positive or negative?" a string tied around your wrist, or an app on your phone that periodically chimes as a reminder to check your thinking.
3. *Write About It.* Writing can be an excellent psychological tool for tracking and shaping your experience. A little writing at the end of the day about the kinds of thoughts you noticed can have a terrific integrating function. It isn't necessarily about proving that you are making progress, but rather using the writing as a tool to support your developing self-awareness.
4. *Start Simple.* Rather than trying to transform every single negative thought into a positive one – which could get overwhelming and frustrating – choose an issue or perhaps a set of 2-3 issues on which you want to consciously practice changing your thinking. So negative beliefs like "I'm terrible with money" or "nobody will ever love me" become "I'm good with money" (or maybe "I'm getting better with money all the time") and "I am loveable" or even "I am loved." In addition to these affirmative phrases, imagine yourself getting your desire outcome as simply and concretely as possible. Do this periodically throughout your day and in particular be on the lookout for the negative versions of these thoughts to surface. If you notice very strong negative thoughts and emotions coming up in response consistently, that might be an area where you need to do some inner work (more on that ahead!)
5. *Give it Time.* All human beings have a remarkable inborn capacity to change their habits – both mental and behavioral. But it takes time and persistence. A few lucky souls might be able to develop a successful positive thinking habit in a matter of days, but for the majority, it's something we're going to want to keep working on week after week, month after month. Sometimes it may feel like two steps forward, one step back – just keep in mind that however slow the going, you are making progress.
6. *Keep practicing.* Whatever positive thoughts you have chosen to cultivate, keep working with them, day after day, week after week. Even in the face of doubt and negative emotion, keep up the practice! The brain needs consistency, not perfection (more on this in Chapter 3).

7. *Be Real with Yourself.* If there is an area of your life that requires work, acknowledge it, and then start figuring out how to do that work. Rather than allowing positive thoughts that suggest a magical solution, try something more grounded: “I can do this,” “I can learn this,” “I’m getting better at this,” “I’m going to figure this out.” Don’t let positive thinking become a substitute for work ethic and smart strategy; rather, use positive thinking to support the *implementation* of work ethic and strategy.

CHAPTER 2 WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT? (ACHIEVING THE RIGHT GOALS)

Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world.

Joel A. Barker

Before anything in your life can change, you need to get clear on what it is you want to create for yourself. Staying vague is like rolling the dice: maybe it will just come to you – or maybe you'll spend years wandering through life dissatisfied. For this reason, often times the first step in a coaching process is to dig down and get clear on your goals.

Goals are a little bit different from *wants*. You may want all sorts of things: a beautiful home, a loving partner, a healthy family, a thriving community, a great high paying job, success in business and/or the creative arts, money in the bank, work-life balance, a fit healthy body, freedom to travel the world – all beautiful things. But sometimes dwelling in those *wants* can feel a little overwhelming. Wanting something that you don't have, day after day, month after month, can leave us hyper-aware of everything that seems to be missing in our lives. Instead of focusing towards the positive things we intend to create, we start to dwell on the emptiness of everything we don't have yet.

Goals, on the other hand, include intentionality and commitment. Once you set a goal to have a beautiful home, you are declaring your intention to start taking steps to realize it. Goals imply action over time. They require work, strategy, and persistence. And because of this, it's also possible to get overwhelmed having too many goals. Human beings have an extraordinary capacity for creating change, but we also have a limited bandwidth with regards to how much we can do at once. It isn't only our minds that have limited space – other constraints like limited time, money, and other resources, mean that we have to be smart and specific in our goal setting. Ultimately, we may be able to accomplish everything on our list – just not all at the same time.

Focus: One Thing at a Time

When I start with a new client, I have them write out everything in their life they would like to change. This makes for a good starting point both for envisioning the future and getting the ball rolling on long term goals. Once that's done, I then ask them to look at the list and tell me what feels most important. Where would they like to start?

It's fine to have several irons in the fire, or a couple of pots on the backburner (or whatever metaphor you prefer) – as long as those background projects are not sapping too much time and energy. It can be a good idea to plan ahead and actively lay groundwork for multiple goals as you go. But when the time comes to really make progress on something, it's important to choose what you are going to focus on for a given period of time. Most of us know how to do this on a micro level: I'm going to spend the next two hours focusing on marketing my business, cleaning my living room, or connecting with my family. But creating transformation in life requires that

we can stretch this out for the long term: focus on clear goals that span weeks or months at a time.

Generally I'll recommend to my clients to focus on one or two primary goals and at most one or two secondary goals in a given period. This isn't meant to be a prison: goals can be revised and goal priorities can be changed over time as the situation develops. But in the meantime, narrowing it down like this instantly creates a path forward. The other thing to remember about goals is that when you take them seriously, they have end-points. So once the primary goal is achieved, a new one that has been on hold gets bumped up. In my experience, spreading yourself thin trying to "do it all" over a six month term is far less productive than focusing in on a couple goals at a time, achieving them, and then moving on with confidence to the next thing.

I first learned about the importance of focus many years ago from a wonderful coach named Kristine Oller (in fact she has an entire audiobook on the topic). In the beginning, I was very resistant to the idea. I have always been someone of eclectic interests and I resented the notion of being forced to narrow it down. Particularly in creative work, I found that having multiple projects, perhaps even across multiple mediums, created a kind of creative synergy where the projects fed each other. And for me, this was (and still is) true.

What convinced me that Kristine was right was where it came to balancing creative projects with everything else that life demands: professional development, business and marketing concerns, managing finances, cultivating relationships, continuing education, and prioritizing work-life balance. The truth is, there is a limit to how much we can do in a day, not only because of time but because of the sheer mental energy it takes to juggle so many concerns.

Another advantage to working with clear goals is that they can keep you on track when life gets distracting, frustrating, or overwhelming. If we rely solely on how we are feeling on a given day to determine our progress, we will often be at the mercy of whatever circumstances fate has in store. A focused goal can keep us moving even when we feel disheartened or confused. In our modern information age, the number of things asking for our attention on a given day can be astronomical. If we aren't careful, notifications, web tabs, emails and texts can start to take over. Having clear goals in place can serve as a kind of mental anchor in the midst of the flux.

To summarize: making meaningful change in your life begins with turning wants into specific goals, and getting serious about goals means setting priorities. You can't have it all at once, but you can start today down the path of meeting one goal after another after another as your life unfolds. It begins with a choice: where do you want to go first?

What Do You Really Want?

As simple as this may sound, for many of us getting our goals in place can be a bit more complicated. This is because some people are not really sure what they actually want, and for others, they think they want something when really, in their heart of hearts, they don't.

We all have times in our lives where we are unsure what exactly we want – which fork in the road to take – when presented with a decision: a secure job or an exciting dive into entrepreneurship? Staying in town and marrying Sally, or moving to New England for graduate school? When we reach these moments, some deep inner reflection around clarifying our values and dreams can be useful. These may never be easy decisions, but the better we come to know ourselves and our values, the more likely we are choose the right path.

Sometimes there is not so much a fork in the road as a multitude of paths winding away through a thick fog: what career do I want to pursue? What kind of business do I want to create? Which communities do I want to invest my time in joining? How can I best be of service to the world?

It is natural to come into this place of uncertainty from time to time, but it can also become a bit of a trap. We can become so focused on “not knowing” that we spend months at the crossroads, anxiously spinning our wheels before fate finally forces a decision. Or worse: we spend so much time at the crossroads that we end up making our home there, resigned to indecision for years at a time.

In my experience, the only cure for chronic indecision is action. I don't mean arbitrarily making commitments, but rather being willing to actively test the waters. If it's a career question, make a list of possibilities, from the reasonable to the exotic and start investigating. Meet and speak with as many people as you can in those professions. Spend some time around those work places, if possible. By taking action and moving out into the world, we give our energies an opportunity to get unstuck, and equally important, we start to gather the vital information we need to ultimately make a decision.

As long as we are stuck at the crossroads, we can only imagine what might be down one path or another. But in moving out into the world, living into the possibilities we are considering and speaking with others about their experiences, we can start to get a much more concrete sense of how a certain path would fit for us.. In other words, the only cure for indecisiveness is action. By getting out there and learning and doing, you enrich your decision-making process with vital new data. At some point, once we have enough new information and experience, our intuition will start to kick in about the right next step. More often than not, if we just keep actively engaging our energies in the possibilities before us, the right path eventually emerges organically and somewhat obviously.

But do You Really Want It?

The other major pitfall in committing to goals is that sometimes we set goals for ourselves that don't really reflect our true needs and values. There are many reasons why this would happen. The most common one is that we have received and internalized messages from our families or peer communities about what we should do. Both our parental figures and the social tribes we belong to can have tremendous influence on our actions and our sense of identity.

Some classic examples of this phenomenon are the parents who pressure their child to get a stable job at a bank instead of pursuing their ambitions, or a peer group that encourages a man to spend money on a fancy car as a status symbol, when his secret desire is to travel the world instead. But it can be anything, really. Any number of ideas can be impressed upon us from the outside about what we are supposed to do.

The trouble is that after spending huge amounts of time and energy – perhaps years – pursuing the things we think we are *supposed* to want, we begin to feel secretly dissatisfied, or at worst, burnt out to the point of crisis. Dan Millman writes about his own experience of this in *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*. Millman spent years obsessed with athletic achievement, but when he finally reached his goal, he felt a terrible emptiness and realized his deeper needs were not being addressed. The good news is that this kind of crisis is often the beginning of a journey toward deeper self-knowledge and transformation.

For some, the path of goal achievement can be even trickier. Some individuals grow up in homes where they feel they must perform in order to get the love and attention of their caregivers. For a child, love and attention is perhaps the most valuable psychological currency there is, so if lovability is tied to performance, a pattern may be set in motion for an adult life of constantly having to prove one's worth. This can result in constant striving toward a distant horizon, never satisfied with what has been achieved. A lot of actors, performers, and artists fall into this trap.

Fortunately, with time and attention, all of these patterns can eventually be corrected in adult life. But the first step is coming to see the pattern for what it is, acknowledging the wound in order to mend it. As we acknowledge and mend these old patterns, our goals naturally begin to shift towards our true path in life.

Maryanne was pressured all her life to be an outstanding student and become a doctor. But several years into medical school, she feels herself burning out, and finally admits that what she really wants is to work as a community organizer. Fortunately her sharp analytical skills and natural bedside manner make her a great fit for engaging with disadvantaged communities. Phil took the safe path of becoming an electrician, but after five years of boredom he realizes that he really wants to design electronics. He begins to look for ways to leverage his real world experience when applying for graduate school programs. Lunette caved to cultural pressure and married a perfectly nice man at the age of 21 ... and years later finally admits that she is a bisexual and needs to further explore intimacy with women. Luke spends years trying to prove himself as an entrepreneur with moderate success before finally accepting that what he really wants to do is work with animals and advocate for the environment. In the moment, these realizations can feel devastating, but in time, they become milestones marking the transition to a more fulfilling life.

Sometimes these moments of self-realization do not require any major life transition. Sarah can realize she needs several hours of quiet time a week in order to recharge, and take steps to set the necessary boundaries around work and family to make it happen. Bob can finally admit that he loves playing immersive video games and stop shaming himself for it. Tim can recognize he has a lucrative and stimulating corporate job and still insist on carving out time on the side to make music as a way of feeding his soul. These are all worthy personal goals insofar as they have a real impact on quality of life for the person in question.

In the early 20th century Swiss psychologist Carl Jung developed a program for adult development he called *individuation*. In essence, it was a psychological system for more fully realizing your self – becoming who you really are – through a process of inner work and integration. Individuation means moving beyond our parents' agendas for us, and also beyond the collective experience of the tribe or culture that Jung provocatively referred to as the “herd mentality.”

Some people have confused individuation with *individualism* – but this is a misunderstanding of the term. Individualism is a philosophy that holds the individual is more important than the group, and in its shadow aspect can be used to laud selfishness and greed. Individuation, on the other hand, is a process of self-development, the ongoing psychological creation of the individual, but not in a way that devalues community. On the contrary, I would argue that individuation means you have that much more to give to the group, because you truly understand your unique gifts and have developed your abilities. The strongest communities are made up of fully individuated persons who recognize the value of working together and supporting each other.

Even so, breaking away from the expectations of others to pursue goals more true to your deep self can be a painful process. Particularly if we have come to identify with these external expectations – if we have confused them with who we understand ourselves to be – we can at first experience a lot of fear that we will lose our identity by breaking free. The truth is, we are doing just the opposite. Letting go of the undeveloped false-personality we were given, and discovering who we really are. It is a big leap that requires a fair amount of courage. These ideas will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 11 on individuation.

So how do you know the goals you've set are right for you? Talking it through with a trusted friend, coach or therapist can often bring more clarity. Beyond that, it's usually a matter of trial and error. If you find yourself meeting goals and feeling strangely dissatisfied, that may be an indication that a re-evaluation is called for. Likewise, if you find yourself making little progress over time due to a lack of motivation or self-sabotaging behaviors, it can be worthwhile to re-examine what you really want. Keep in mind though that sometimes we truly do want something and sabotage ourselves anyway, due to fear of success or some other unconscious drive – situations like this will be the topic of Chapter 7.

Pragmatics: Achieving the Right Goals

1. *Brainstorm.* Find a medium where you can write down words and move them around. This might be a computer or smartphone app, or if you want a more tactile experience try moving around post-its or notecards on a bulletin board – even plain old pencil and paper will do, just be sure to start with a fresh sheet if things on the page start to get convoluted. Next write down all the things you want to change in your life, from minor habits to major dreams. It can be about anything: money, career, social status, relationships, family, being of service to the world. Get it all down. Next try reorganizing these lists along two dimensions: things that are most important to you, and things that are most urgent. Keep re-arranging until it feels right. Eventually, a map will emerge to help you set your priorities about what you want to be focusing on right now. Keep in mind that some goals may take quite a bit of time to come to fruition, so if you want to achieve them next year, you might want to start doing some preliminary footwork now.

2. *Consult with trusted others.* If you have people in your life who know you well and whom you trust to give you feedback that is both honest and supportive, checking in with them about your goals might be a good idea, particularly if you are having trouble deciding between a couple of attractive options for your current focus. Sometimes just the act of talking things out with a trusted other can help you find greater clarity. Please note I am not suggesting you let the other person make the decision for you! Don't give away your power! Even if the other person advises you against it, if in the course of the conversation your gut instinct tells you to go for it, trust your gut. Your support system is there to help you decide, not tell you what to do.

3. *Test the Waters.* If you find yourself settling on a few primary goals – or if you still have too many and can't decide – start making plans to get out there and take action. Learn more about what following your goal might entail. What kind of time and energy will be required? What resources will you need to develop? Which relationships will be most helpful? Get into the world of your prospective goal as much as you can and let this new information and experience wash over you. The deeper you go into this new territory, the better equipped you will be to make a final decision.

4. *Create a Timeline and Action Steps.* Once you are ready to commit to the pursuit of a goal, start to sort out what sorts of actions you will need to take to move toward it in a timely manner, and come up with a timeline for taking those steps. All of this can be revised as you go, but having a plan in place makes the work specific and keeps you moving. Generally speaking, it's good to have action steps that are as specific and measurable as possible – you want to be able to know that you completed what you said you were going to do, so you can properly evaluate its effects. Get as specific as you can. “I want to lose weight” can be hard to measure – “I intend to lose ten pounds over the next eight weeks” is specific and measurable.

5. *Find an Accountability System.* Chapter 5 focuses on the importance of recruiting others to support you in moving forward. One of the most powerful ways others can do this is through accountability agreements. In short, *find a person or group who will hold you accountable for doing what you say you are going to do*, whether it's “I'm going to take a full day to myself this week with the phone off,” “I'm going to ask three men out on a date this month,” “I'm going to go to the gym six times this week and work out for at least an hour,” “I'm going to call three investors”, “...send out ten resumes,” “...attend one networking event” – find someone who will check in with you about keeping the commitment. Often times this can be a co-partnership, where you also hold the other person accountable. Or find a coach or therapist who will be checking in with you about your timeline and action steps on a regular basis. It is much easier to procrastinate and play it safe and small when nobody else is looking!

6. *Revise Your Strategy as Needed.* If you're showing up consistently and following through on your action steps, and you still don't seem to be getting any closer to reaching your goal, it's time to re-evaluate and potentially revise your strategy. You may need to make minor adjustments, add new steps to handle unforeseen elements, or try something new altogether. Here again working with someone else, either personal or professional, to evaluate and rework your strategies, can be very helpful. As nice as it would be to think we can do it all by ourselves, we all have blind spots that others can help us fill.

7. *Stay Vigilant.* As you gain more information and experience through taking action, don't be afraid to ask, is this still what I really want? In the abstract stages of imagining and planning the road ahead, it's very easy to get attached to an idea of what something is supposed to be like, how it is supposed to make you feel. But once you are out in the field actually doing it, you have access to a great deal more information than you did when you set out. You may find that one of your chosen primary goals is not quite as urgent or as important as you initially thought. Maybe because it was an external goal introjected by family or peers – or maybe because the actual reality of the goal just isn't what was imagined. When you hit those moments, don't lose heart – they are important steps on the journey to self-knowledge. Letting go of the wrong goal sets you free to pursue what really matters to you.

CHAPTER 3
CHANGING YOUR BRAIN:
NEUROPLASTICITY IN PRACTICE

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.

Will Durant

It was not long ago that the scientific community believed that human brains were more or less set in their ways by early adulthood. The developmental period for how a person would “turn out” was childhood and adolescence, after that, your brain was thought to be done transforming. It is true that there are some major developmental milestones for the brain on the journey to adulthood – major neural growth spurts, if you will. But in recent decades neuroscientists have made an astounding discovery: the old model was completely wrong. The human brain has an inborn capacity to grow and change through the entire human lifetime.

The scientific term for this ongoing brain transformation is *neuroplasticity*. In many ways it has revolutionized the intersection between neuroscience and psychology. No, you are not “stuck” with however your brain turned out after childhood. Although it might not be easy, science has demonstrated that on a neurological level, you can heal, and you can grow.

This chapter will review some of the basics of neuroplasticity to give you an idea of how it works. Then we’ll look at what this means as an actual practice in your life.

Neuroplasticity Basics

Although much about the relationship between the brain and consciousness remains unknown, we do know a lot about how information moves around in the brain. Individual brain cells, called neurons, are organized into vast interconnected networks, and those networks in turn form something like circuits. Different clusters of neurons become specialized for processing different kinds of information: color, shapes, sounds, words, tones, space, time, faces, emotions, and so on.

Any time we learn anything new, new neural connections form to facilitate the learning. This occurs in part through a simple mechanism where neurons that consistently activate at the same time begin to connect up with each other. This is famously summed up in Hebb’s Law: “neurons that fire together wire together.” So, for example, in learning to ride a bicycle, the neural networks associated with activating your muscles to move the peddles, your sense of balance, your visual experience of the bicycle, as well as all related bicycle language (the words “bicycle,” “wheel,” “peddles,” “handlebars,” “kickstand” etc…) will all become associated with each other through repeated practice. Your brain physically grows new neural connections to help lock the learning into place.

Some of the most extraordinary stories of neuroplasticity come from scientific studies of how brains process the senses. Generally speaking, vision gets processed in a large area towards the back of the brain known as the visual cortex. We humans are very visual creatures, so it takes a

lot of neural real estate to process the rich visual environments that we experience every day. So what happens to the visual cortex when people go blind?

Multiple studies have come to the surprising conclusion that the visual cortex is just as active in blind people as in sighted people. It has simply gone through a process of neuroplastic change to become repurposed. Instead of processing visual information which it no longer receives from the eyes, the visual cortex comes to process touch and sound on a much deeper and more complex level. One study, for example, found that when blind people had their visual cortex disrupted by electrical pulses, they could no longer read braille with their fingers. They had not lost their sense of touch, but they had lost the nuanced capacity to interpret their touch impressions as language. One of the new duties of the visual cortex had become a capacity to “see” with the fingers.

In this way, the brain is always looking for new ways to work better. When a new solution is explored, repeated successes lead to the building of new neural networks. So if processing sound information in a certain way starts giving better outcomes for navigating the environment, those new processing networks will lock into place for regular use. And this goes for just about anything: learning to drive a car, building friendships, navigating intimate relations, public speaking, business skills – you name it.

There’s good news and bad news here. The bad news is that if something is not working for us but we just keep doing it, we’re only going to keep strengthening those bad connections get more neurologically rigid. This is how bad habits form and cling to us throughout life. It can also show up in the negative stories we can’t stop telling about ourselves: after twenty years of believing you are no good with money (or with people, or fitness or marketing or communication), it can take quite a push to get out of the inertia of that neurological rut. The good news is, change is always possible. However stuck we may seem in a pattern of behavior, the brain has the capacity to transform.

Neuroplasticity in Practice

There are two primary factors to keep in mind when engaging your own neuroplastic potential. The first is that neuroplasticity is strengthened by salience of experience, particularly in the form of belief and emotion. The more emotionally charged an experience is for us, or the more meaningful the story attached to it, the more likely it is to have an impact. This dimension of change will be the focus of the next chapter, on emotion. The second factor, which will be the focus for the remainder of this chapter, is that it takes time and consistency for neural networks to shift, so persistence really is key.

When it comes to changing habits and behaviors, patience and persistence win the day. New neural networks form through repeated experience and mindful attention. Another traditional aphorism that expresses this is that *practice makes perfect*. The more focused attention and repeated activity you give to the element you want to change, the more your brain will naturally shift to support the new system.

In some ways, this is not unlike physical fitness. This first time you ask your body to do something new – running a mile, lifting 50 pounds, taking a yoga class – it is likely to be uncomfortable and difficult. The body isn’t quite set up for that kind of activity and this results in discomfort and fatigue. Thank goodness, the body, like the brain, is capable of adapting over time. If you keep at the new physical activity, gently but persistently over days and weeks, the

body will begin to build strength, flexibility and endurance. After a few weeks or months, running a mile goes from being a distressing activity to a pleasurable one. So it is with the brain.

Whether it is brain or body that we are looking to transform, it is important not to force it. When you push too hard at physical activity you are not ready for, you can injure yourself. Attempting to force yourself into a new behavior can backfire in different ways: a crash diet becomes an out-of-control eating binge; an overly confident new social persona results in a humiliating situation; thrusting a new product or service into the marketplace before understanding its nuances can result in financial loss; and so on. Perhaps the worst part about these instances of forcing ourselves forward is that we can then get discouraged and cease progress altogether. It's like rushing forward blindly in the dark and hitting a wall, when if we just took our time and kept our wits about us, we would be out into the light soon enough.

Patience can be hard, particularly in the overly-stimulating information climate of the 21st century. We are bombarded with choices, opportunities, notifications, communications all the time, and the fact that so much is now available at the push of a button has trained us to expect instant gratification. In this way, our smartphones and internet apps (wonderful though they are) are contributing to a kind of neuroplasticity gone wrong: they train our brains to expect constant stimulation and instant gratification, when sometimes genuine change requires just the opposite: moving slowly and steadily towards the goal.

But here is what the science says: when it comes to the brain, incrementalism usually wins the day. Taking small steps with positive results and sticking to them over time will gradually begin to shift the neural architecture. These early shifts serve as a more stable foundation to go even further. It is not particularly sexy and goes somewhat against the grain of our fast-paced culture, but the potential rewards for making transitioning to this kind of slow-and-steady approach can be great.

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