

3. Change

The mind can change all the furniture around in the room but the walls remain.

—Jean Klein, “Who Am I? The Sacred Quest”

Now that we understand a little more about why it’s so hard to change our habits, good or bad, or indeed to apply any kind of discipline to ourselves, let’s look at *how* we try to change, and why we so often fail.

Is the self-help industry okay?

There’s a vast literature of books, videos, and other content out there predicated on the idea of helping each of us “become a better person”. You know the kind of thing: be more productive, be happier, be calmer, be kinder, be wiser—even be richer. It’s interesting that the one thing all these books take for granted is that *there’s something wrong with us that needs fixing*.

And maybe, as consumers of these things, we’re a little complicit too. After all, change is hard work, and it might mean facing up to some unpalatable truths about who we are and where we’re going. Much easier just to go and buy another new self-help book. It’s a kind of displacement activity that means we don’t have to actually *do* anything.

Even if we procrastinate about changing, though, we still seem to feel somehow—and the world does its best to reinforce the idea—that we’re not good enough as we are. Further, that if we just take steps to fix the things that are wrong with us, we’ll be a perfect person and therefore happy.

What if there’s nothing wrong with you?

What if that just weren’t true, though? What if the idea that perfection is attainable were just a myth? And what if you already have, and are, everything you need? And what if, whatever you are, there’s nothing you can do to change it anyway?

I mean, it would explain a lot. For one thing, the continued success of self-help books. If they actually *worked*, why would people keep on buying them, year after year? Clearly, a lot of people feel that there’s something wrong with them, and that they need to change something about themselves, and that reading self-help books will achieve that. Equally clearly, it doesn’t.

People who sell solutions, in other words, have a vested interest in convincing us that we have a problem. But I don't think we do.

For example, lots of people want to sell us the practice of meditation or mindfulness. We can buy books, apps, podcasts, classes, courses, streams, and goodness knows what else, and the fundamental sales message behind all of them is that they will cure what ails us.

“Are you anxious, angry, or unhappy? No problem: after consuming this product or service, you will magically be a calm, serene little Buddha full of bliss.” How wonderful!

The self-help quick fix

To be sure, mindfulness and self-help books often do make people feel better, at least for a little while. But, just as with cabbage soup retreats, the effect is temporary, because it's not really bringing about any lasting change. Why not? The answer is simple: *habit*.

We are what we repeatedly do, as the saying goes, so it doesn't matter how fervently we do something *once*, or even for a couple of weeks. Sooner or later our old habits will return, and we'll have the same 83 problems we had when we started.

So if reading self-help books doesn't turn you overnight into a serene person, what does? Becoming a monk, perhaps?

Monks are people too

Monks seem pretty serene, at least as seen on TV. But the truth is they're just ordinary people, with the same flaws, irritations, doubts, and vices as anybody else. When a group of people live closely together, they get on each other's nerves; anybody who's ever shared a house, or even just been part of a family, knows this perfectly well.

That's why the 6th-century Italian monk Benedict of Nursia wrote a famous book on how to deal with these interpersonal problems: the so-called “[Rule of St. Benedict](#)”. He provides practical advice and remedies for such everyday issues as disobedience, pride, oversleeping, gossip, anger, jealousy, laziness, unpunctuality, gluttony, and even monk-on-monk violence. Clearly these things do regularly happen in monasteries, or Benedict wouldn't have felt the need to address them.

So monks are people too, with all the innumerable faults and failings that every person has. They are, however, at least striving to overcome them, or at least to mitigate them, through deliberate effort and discipline. But they don't see the process as a permanent cure for the disease of being human. No-one gets discharged from a monastery because they're “fixed”, and will never be angry, lazy, or gossipy again. That just doesn't happen, in a monastery or anywhere else.

Living with your 83 faults

Shall we say, then, that just as everybody has 83 problems, they also have 83 faults? And that, while it's a seductive idea that you should, or could, fix everything that's wrong with you and become perfect in every way, that belief is simply the 84th fault?

What if we tried a new, rather radical approach: accepting that we're all extremely imperfect and that *that's okay*? Further, that attempting to fix our imperfections doesn't work, and only serves to reinforce the pervasive idea that there's something wrong with us: we're weak-willed, undisciplined, and unfocused, and the only thing that can save us is buying more self-help books.

You can't change yourself, in other words, because you don't have one. All there is is a deeply flawed human being with a careenium full of nonsense, the same as everybody else. Some of the thoughts bouncing around in my head are, no doubt, noble, intelligent, and virtuous. Other thoughts are selfish, dumb, and lazy. I contain multitudes. There's no "I", indeed: only the multitudes.

So there's no excuse for procrastinating and refusing to really get on with your life until you're "fixed". What you are now is what you'll always be. As much as you may dislike that person, or find fault with them, fundamentally, they're who you are. Maybe it's time to think about making friends with them. After all, you'll be spending a lot of time together.

Here's the paradox, then: while you can't change yourself, you *can* change to be *more* yourself. Who is it, after all, that wants to change? Maybe it's less about becoming a different person than it is about peeling off the various layers of disguise that we've accreted over our lives, revealing who we really were all along.

Therapists don't perform personality transplants; they just help to take the sharp edges off. A patient may become less reactive or critical, more open and able to let people in. In other words, therapy is about understanding the self that you are.

*But part of getting to know yourself is to **unknow** yourself—to let go of the limiting stories you've told yourself about who you are so that you aren't trapped by them, so you can live your life and not the story you've been telling yourself about your life.*

—Lori Gottlieb, "[Maybe You Should Talk To Someone](#)"

And, while we can't actually *be* a different person, we can *do* differently. Perhaps that's a better thing to aim for. It's at least more achievable.

Bringing about lasting, positive change *intentionally*, though, is difficult: we all suck at it.

Resolutions

Let's talk about New Year's resolutions, for example. Why don't they work? We all know they don't, but we continue to make them every year.

For the first two weeks of January we feel very virtuous, but towards the end of the month we're already feeling guilty and conflicted, and by February we've often conveniently forgotten our resolutions altogether. No problem: we'll just stash them in our personal Closet of Failure, along with all the other things that didn't take, like ice skates, the clarinet, and a ton of exercise equipment.

Why New Year's resolutions don't work

The first reason that resolutions don't work is usually that they're vague, sweeping aspirations that are impossible to pin down to anything specific: "Live life to the fullest". What does that even mean? How would we know if we were succeeding or failing?

"Spend more time with family and friends"? Define "more". Define "time". Define "friends". And so on. The intent is clear, but it's not actionable.

On the other hand, we sometimes make resolutions that sound impressive, but might not in practice amount to very much: "Learn Portuguese". To what standard? Good enough to pass as a native speaker? To be able to converse fluently, at length, on any and all subjects? Or just to be able to order a beer and a *pão de queijo*?

If we take ten weeks of night classes, and get a deckle-edged certificate of completion, does that count as "learning Portuguese"? Surely not, but it's *something*, all the same. What if we just memorise the fifty most common nouns? And so on. Basically, we can define success as unambitiously as we want.

Unachievable goals

Another problem is that our resolutions are often grand, all-or-nothing pronouncements that don't admit for the possibility of *partial* success.

"Quit smoking" seems pretty straightforward, but what if we successfully avoid cigarettes for eleven months, then cave and have a couple of puffs at a Christmas party? Does that count as success or failure? What if we continue to smoke, but cut our cigarette consumption in half? That's not nothing, but it's also not the same as quitting.

Other resolutions fail because they're simply unrealistic. "Run a three-minute mile" is not a good resolution because no matter how disciplined we are, we can't achieve it, and nor can anyone else. Similarly, "become a calm person" is not something that's within our power to do, so there's no point resolving to do it. We're only setting ourselves up for more failure.

Just as we can't hypnotise someone to do something they fundamentally don't want to do, we also can't hypnotise *ourselves* with a resolution that we don't really care about or that goes against our own nature.

“Do 100 press-ups every morning” isn’t an unreasonable resolution in itself, but we probably won’t do it because it’s hard, boring, and irrelevant. Suppose we *did* succeed: what then? We’d still be the same person, in the same place, with the same problems. Just with bigger triceps.

Let’s be smart about this

If you read business-oriented self-help books, you’ll be familiar with the idea of *SMART* goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Sure, it’s jargon, but there’s a core of truth in it.

The resolutions we’ve seen so far fail at the first four of those hurdles, and the fifth usually takes care of the rest: we neglect to specify any kind of schedule or deadline for our new habit.

For example: “Go to the gym regularly”. Define “regularly”! If you go three times in the year, does that count, as long as it’s at precisely-measured intervals? How about just twice?

Or even: “Keep in touch with old friends / family members?” How often? To what extent? For how long? And when do we have to start?

While we’re enthusiastic about making bold resolutions at the beginning of the year, we usually never think about them again. We certainly don’t regularly check in and review our progress—indeed, with such unachievable resolutions there’s a strong disincentive to do this.

Without giving these things some kind of anchor point in time, and measuring our progress towards them at frequent intervals, then, it’s impossible to really know whether we’re succeeding or failing at them.

Win or lose, you always lose

And that’s yet another problem with this way of attempting to change our habits: we tend to set it up as a pass/fail test. If we fail, as we almost inevitably will, it makes us feel bad, reinforces the idea that there’s something wrong with us as a person, and discourages us from any further efforts at change.

On the other hand, even if we succeed, so what? We still have 83 problems, and we’re the same flawed human beings that we were on January 1st. Oh well, never mind. There’s always next year.

Focus

One thing we can say in favour of resolutions, I suppose, is that they at least identify something important that we want to do or to change, and that gives us a point of focus. Maybe that’s something we can work with.

If our resolution every year were simply “Be a better person”, for example, that doesn’t give us anything to get hold of. “Be fitter”, by contrast, at least gives us a clue that it’s our physical well-being we’re concerned about.

We could take that idea and ask “What if, instead of setting myself more or less vague and unrealistic goals about this, I simply decided to *focus* more on this issue in the coming year?”

Choose focus areas, not resolutions

Instead of setting ourselves up for failure, then, what if we set ourselves up for success? Suppose, instead of making resolutions, we leaned in to the “point of focus” idea, and identified a few values we care about, or areas of our lives we want to put more emphasis on?

For example, suppose we said something like, “This year, I want to focus on being a good friend”.

We might jot down a few specific ideas to flesh out what that could look like: “Make myself available to friends when they need me”, or “Concentrate on listening when friends have problems, instead of giving advice”.

We could make a deal with ourselves that every month, on the first day of the month, we’ll spend a few minutes thinking about what we’ve done towards this goal during the previous month, and over the year so far. Write down occasions when we feel we did something positive towards our focus area, and also when we forgot about it, or slipped up, or our efforts didn’t work out for one reason or another.

When you fall, pick something up

For example, maybe your friend wanted to tell you about how she made a mistake at work, and instead of listening, you made the conversation all about you: “That’s nothing. Wait till you hear the foul-up that *I* made this week!”

Whoops. Well, we all make that kind of mistake, and sometimes recognise afterwards that we should have done something different. By reviewing, thinking, and writing about what you did, you may just learn something useful.

Listening, after all, is something we could all stand to focus on a little more.



“Ah, I see you’re trying to vent. May I offer you some annoyingly pragmatic solutions?””

Over the course of a year of this kind of focus, and perhaps even subsequent years, you’ll have some small successes, and many small failures.

You’ll feel like you’re making progress at times, or standing still at others, and even sometimes going backwards. That’s normal. Your goal was just to remember to *focus* on the thing, without pre-judging what should or shouldn’t happen. And you did it. Well done!

Staying with your choices

The important thing is to make a clear decision about what to focus our limited resources of time, energy, and self-discipline on. By doing that, we implicitly give ourselves permission not to worry too much about everything *else*.

We can only focus on one thing at a time, after all: that’s what “focus” means.

Of course, while focusing our minds on what really matters can help a lot, it’s of no use if it doesn’t actually change what we *do*. This is mostly a matter of *habit*, and that’s the subject of our next chapter.