

Lasting Change: **4 Things that Work, 4 Things that Don't**

Deep, lasting, personal change – it's something we yearn for, something we resist, and something that's really, really hard to achieve. We both welcome and resist change, simultaneously pray for it and run away from it. Just think back on all those times when you were already motivated and passionate and ready for deep and lasting change, but didn't know how to get yourself unstuck or stick with a change process once you'd finally started.

Seriously, *how* does lasting change actually happen? How do we get untracked? How does the process begin to unfold? How do we manage to stay on track? And how, on a deeper level, do we find the practical wisdom we need for God's transforming power to work itself out in our everyday life? After all, God's life-changing influence in our lives isn't some sort of magical spiritual wand that's waved over us. Real, lasting, change is God's power mysteriously bringing alive every muscle, every nerve, every synapse, every thought, and every ounce of will on our part as well.

As we begin to explore the How of lasting change, let's step back and start with the big picture: with what works and what doesn't work for most of us. For example, medical research tells us that even if we're faced with an unambiguous and literal case of "change your life or die," the odds are 9 to 1 *against* any of us making significant changes! In the case of patients recovering from life-threatening heart bypass surgery, researchers discovered that, two years later, 90% of people still hadn't made meaningful changes to their unhealthy lifestyles. That seems crazy, doesn't it? How can that be? What are we doing wrong?

4 Things that *Don't* Work

Part of the reason for the odds being stacked so heavily against us, is that most of us rely on four "usual suspects" to motivate us that don't continue to work over time. Let's look at them one by one.

A sense of crisis. Most of us have experienced how a crisis can often trigger some sort of temporary breakdown in our normal way of behaving. And that breakdown can sometimes lead us to a breakthrough moment that's filled with clarity and insight and motivation. But you also know what comes next, right? Just give it a little time. Like with the heart-bypass patients a mere six months after the surgery, a "new normal" inevitably kicks in. Apparently we're not designed to be in chronic crisis mode. Instead, we're wired to adapt. And as we do, the crisis mode mentality fades. And, usually and unfortunately, so does our resolve to stick with change.

Cold hard facts. These don't do the trick, either, do they? Cognitive science (and personal experience) tells us that facts alone don't lead us to change our mind, much less our behavior. Far more important than the facts we're fed is the mental framework that we fit those facts into. We can get all the data in the world, and list all the advantages of making significant changes, but most of the time it's just a case of "in one ear, and out the other." That's because our mental framework and our underlying belief system will tend to reject so-called "facts" that feel irrational, or foolish, or exaggerated. Even more importantly, when it comes to consistent motivation for a change process, emotions (not logic) provide the energy. Cold hard facts don't warm us up sufficiently to engage in behavior that leads to lasting change.

Fear. Now here's a powerful motivator, right? Problem is, fear can just as often leave us feeling paralyzed and *demotivated*. And, even when fear does lash us into changed behavior, it's often only temporary. As with a sense of crisis, we soon adapt to a higher level of fear and we find ourselves sliding right back into our old behavior or thought patterns.

Guilt. Some of seem to specialize in this! The problem with guilt as a motivator is that it almost always backfires and actually becomes counter-productive in the long-term. How often have you found that you'd been guilted into changing only to discover yourself getting resentful and doubly resistant? Chronic guilt, like chronic fear or chronic crisis, tends to become toxic and only harden our inner resistance.

Four Things that *Do* Work

But if none of our four usual motivational suspects works very well for lasting change, then what does? Well here's the fascinating thing that research tells us: the odds reverse from *9 to 1 against* to *8 to 2 for* when we do these 4 things:

Put on new lenses.

Change really begins here. Experiment reframing who you're destined to be. A compelling positive vision of who you could become over time will fuel your desire to stick with the painful parts of any change process. Silence the chattering inner critic. Allow yourself to joyfully and hopefully imagine who you could be, over time. Don't start with who you are now. Start with who (by God's grace and power) you could become. The problem is, most of us struggle with unhealthy shame and, consequently, we don't even allow ourselves to dream about what the "new me" might look like. *Reimagine.*

Aim for radical change.

Seems counter-intuitive, doesn't it? And yet it turns out that only by aiming toward a meaningful, visible, and significant destination will we be able to establish and maintain momentum for very long. When we only aim for tiny, incremental change, we often end up with the worst of both worlds – the pain of discipline without the payoff of satisfying results. For most of us, a steady diet of small change (without a compelling destination at the end of it) feels too boring, too little, too late.

Get some short-term wins.

We start by visualizing the positive “new self.” We continue by going “all in.” Once those big pieces are in place, it's important for us to quickly set some small, achievable goals to demonstrate to ourselves that it's not just more wishful thinking on our part. Most of us can get easily discouraged, and so we need self-reassurance. We need to see some immediate, practical changes to encourage us to keep going. As business guru John Kotter puts it, “Without sufficient wins that are visible, timely, unambiguous, and meaningful, change efforts invariably run into serious problems.”

Find ongoing help.

The path to lasting personal change is too difficult and too important to do on your own. You need encouragement. You need accountability. We all do. God wired us to do life together. So figure out who you can ask to be your support team – those who'll both cheer you on and hold your feet to the fire. And then get yourself a coach – someone who'll help you gain awareness of the change you really want and take responsibility for it.

p.s. Strategic Patience.

That's a two-word phrase worth remembering. This is about the pace of change, about our internal timetable for change, about how often we overestimate what can change in a year and underestimate what can change in five years. Remind yourself about the importance of being *strategic*, focused, and intentional; but at the same time commit to being *patient* and persistent and in it for the long-haul. Think of it as the spiritual and psychological equivalent of wearing braces: strategically tightening the screws bit by bit, then having the patience to let things settle a bit, and then taking the next step, and then the next and the next. And all the while patiently holding on to that compelling vision of how much better it's gonna look and feel years down the line.

Here's the amazing good news. Change can happen. Change does happen. And that's because it's God's desire for us. God's already crazy about us, just as we are. But he's got so much more in store for us. *Believe it.*