

When Change Requires the Extreme

by [Mike Hawkins](#)



Most people believe that behavior change is possible. People also generally agree that people can learn, grow, and replace old habits with new ones. This belief is commonly referred to as a [growth mindset](#) in contrast to a fixed mindset. However, most people also know that change is hard and just because it is possible, doesn't mean it will happen. People can change, but it doesn't mean they will. For those needing to change, especially in some significant way, change might be possible, but often turns out to be unachievable.

There are many reasons why people don't change. For some, it is a fundamental lack of self-awareness. They don't know what they don't know. They don't know the area in which to change or how to go about the change. For others, it is a lack of self-discipline or self-control. They can't override their deeply engrained habits. They lack the willpower or grit to stay with something long enough for it to become the new habit. Or they lack knowledge, support, motivation, or time.

But what if you live or work with someone who struggles with change despite the consequences being severe if they don't? Or if you struggle with a significant change? Is there a proven approach to overcoming entrenched habits?

Because people and circumstances are vastly different, there are many approaches to achieving change. Some of the more popular ones include engaging in [psychotherapy](#), receiving coaching, reading self-help books, undergoing medical treatments, enrolling in rehabilitation clinics, and attending educational seminars. Yet these and other approaches don't always work because they are not the right approach for the specific person and their situation. Just because one person may have had an epiphany reading a book or attending a training seminar doesn't mean it will do the same for someone else. Or just because a counseling methodology worked for one person doesn't mean it will work for another.

Yet when the right approach is used with the right person given their circumstances, people do change. People do achieve lasting change in their habits, behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes. People do overcome addictions, traumas, and mental illnesses. People do become patient, humble, compassionate, and empathetic. People do overcome anger, fear, and anxiety. They do permanently lose weight, exercise, and regain their health. But, yes, for some, change requires an extreme approach.

Change always starts with an accurate self-awareness and knowing what needs to be done. Then it generally involves building motivation, having self-belief, gaining knowledge, taking responsibility, creating a plan, and receiving support. This is then followed by sustained effort, discipline, and self-control. But even an accurate self-awareness combined with these other elements doesn't guarantee successful change. Some people never start the process. Some start but fall back into undesirable habits. Their self talk is something like "I know I need to change, but I can't stop doing what I've always done." Unfortunately for them, they never reach their peak potential. They never experience the freedom and joy of being their best self. Worse, they continue to experience the negative consequences of not changing.

For people who need more extreme measures to break free and achieve change, listed below are several options. When appropriate, consider which ones might work best for you or others in your circle of influence:

- **Dedicated attention** – Allocate uninterrupted time to focus on the new way of thinking or doing. Clear your calendar, take a sabbatical, or get away for extended time as needed to practice, learn, or do something repeatedly until it becomes a natural part of you. Give yourself the time and opportunity to gain an accurate self-awareness, figure out what to do, and then do whatever is needed weekly, daily, or hourly to build the new desired habit(s). Meet frequently with a coach, participate in a counseling intensive, shadow someone fulltime, be observed fulltime, audio or video record yourself, enroll in rehabilitation, join a recovery support group, or do that which is difficult over and over until it is no longer difficult.

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- **Formative experience** – Engage in an experience or event that changes you to your core. Do, endure, or recover from something so influential that it modifies your most fundamental values, beliefs, or personality. It might be changing where you live, where you work, what you do, or with whom you spend time. It might be immersing yourself in a new culture or joining a dedicated group of people on a similar journey. It might be an extreme adversity like hitting the bottom of life in some way. It could be going through a loss like a divorce, bankruptcy, or job firing. It could be an extreme negative experience such as a relationship separation, jail term, trauma, or near-death experience. Or a grueling experience requiring sacrifice and endurance in the pursuit of a significant long-term goal.
- **Removal of options** – Like burning your boat after landing on the shore to go into battle, remove any alternatives that enable you to quit. Remove the possibility of going backward or turning back. If needed, also withdraw from any unhelpful influences or temptations including people, places, and circumstances. Disassociate yourself from whatever enables undesirable patterns of thinking and behaving. Either temporarily or permanently move, change jobs, empty your bank account, sell your assets, change your relationships, or stop visiting certain venues. Eliminate the possible use of coping mechanisms so that the temporary, easy, or convenient options are no longer available.
- **Significant consequence** – Be fully accountable to something by ensuring there are either significant upsides or downsides to it. Commit to gaining or losing something substantial so that the gain of achievement or the pain of failing is so compelling that it drives you to your limits. Make the reward consequence so positive and the punishment consequence so negative that they drive you to achievement. Make the consequences irrevocable so that you are not tempted to change or remove them. Consider what is most important to you and how you might leverage it as a reinforcing or correcting consequence.
- **Progress tracking** – Determine how best to measure your progress and track it dutifully. Example measures might include the number of times a desired behavior is demonstrated, the amount of practice performed, the quantity of work accomplished, or how much time is allocated to something. Methods to track measures can be manual or automated. However they are done, they need to be reliable, unbiased, and provide clear accountability. They can be captured by others or by you. They might be documented in a spreadsheet or on a magnetic dry-erase white board. Make the progress visible to others who are enrolled in helping provide accountability.
- **Faith** – Employ your spiritual belief in God or loyalty to something much bigger than yourself. Immerse yourself in regular prayer or join a faith-based organization or group. Participate frequently in whatever helps maintain your passion and the discipline required to achieve your desired change. Seek a spiritual connection or revelation. Meet with people who provide spiritual support, especially those who have gone through the change you are desiring. Tap into the superpower that only comes from a strong faith, core values, or belief in something bigger than you. Find the inner peace and support that comes with doing something more meaningful than anything you normally do. Pursue something with a higher calling.

Employ these practices to finally experience the growth you've always desired. Enjoy the freedom that comes with going forward permanently. As the iconic musician Ray Charles said "Don't go backwards – you've already been there."

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Article written by [Mike Hawkins](#), award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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