

The Art of Conscious Change – 10 core principles for supporting genuine change

1. Clarify your intentions – *The most important thing is to know the most important thing!* As regularly as you can, ask yourself what is it that you deeply want out of your life? Without a vision and sense of values, we don't have a rudder to steer our boat, nor the wind in the sails to give it forward momentum. Were vulnerable to just floating aimlessly along in life, swayed and directed by external circumstances, cultural norms and other's needs.

We are unlikely to know how to face life's challenges without any guiding values and intentions about how we want to face and manage adversity e.g *life happens for me, not too me*, is an example of a value that can help us grow through adversity.

Our life changes and becomes imbued with meaning when we align our actions with our values and intentions.

Knowing what we deeply value also gives us passion, the deep inner drive to reach for what you love and care about. This is internally driven, and gives us the energy, flow, intuition and drive to move towards a clearer vision and a more solid identity.

Values are different to goals – they are how you want to behave as a human being, what you want to stand for, and the qualities you want to bring into your actions. Goals are what you want to achieve. Values are how you want to be and behave. We tend to live in a goal-oriented society, rather than value oriented society. The good thing about values is that we can live by them regardless of whether we reach our goals or not! What we value directs where we put our attention, what we spend our time on, and the choices we make. It profoundly influences our life in conscious and unconscious ways.

A vision gives us a rudder and wind in our sail to navigate life's oceans. *What is my deepest intention for this day, and at the bigger picture, in my life? What do you value the most?* E.g. your health, your emotional well being and happiness, the quality of your friendships or relationships, how you look, your work, being wealthy, your spiritual development and waking up? *What kind of person do you want to be?* e.g. Kind, discerning, initiating, organised, grateful, playful, compassionate, courageous or patient? *How do you want to relate to*

yourself and others? Once you know what you want, connect with your excitement and desire for it, and then let yourself believe, visualise and imagine it is as possible through all of your 5 senses.

Then make regular contact with your intentions to live true to your values and take action in that direction and attract this into your life. Where you put your attention grows.

Where you put your attention also strengthens and grows neural pathways. This is how we change our brain, to then change our mind.

The more you connect with your deepest intentions, the more likely you are to attract and enact this into your life. It is that simple!

However, many of us have trouble knowing what we truly value and want, due to various factors such as – peer influence, a lack of self-trust, being too busy or ungrounded to reflect, spending too much time in our heads rather than connecting with our hearts and body, being disconnected to our feelings, not having enough validation in our lives to know that our inner world of feelings, talents, resources and capacities matter. Hence it can help to know the obstacles to knowing what we value and want, so that we can address them.

In my view, there are 4 important steps in creating a new habit –

Firstly, we need to develop a clear sense of our intentions and goals. Then we need to broaden our lens to connect with the deeper value and motivations behind these intentions – this is the wind in our sail. This step supports a strong foundation for change and provides the fuel that helps us break out of the familiar gravitational pull of our old ways of being, and to overcome the discomfort of stepping out of our comfort zone.

Secondly, we need to then make clear and specific commitments that will be true to and honour our values and intentions. This involves deciding when, where and how you are going to be true to these intentions. Research has found that when we visualize realizing our goals through all 5 senses with an elevated emotion, we are much more likely to make this goal happen. This creates a future memory, that then sends a signal to our body that it has already happened ahead of time.

Thirdly, knowing and anticipating the patterns, self-limiting beliefs and obstacles that could get in the way of these goals.

Fourthly, developing strategies to manage and prevent these obstacles is an important strategy in the realization of intentions. When we visualize in detail ahead of time managing these challenges, again research shows that the chances of realizing our goals is vastly increased.

2. Cultivate resources – It can make a huge difference to your well being when you practice putting your attention towards the things that make you feel good, grounded, relaxed and most like the self you like to feel. A lot of the time we focus our attention on our thoughts about what isn't working (either in ourselves or others), on our worries about the future, or what we don't want (psychologists call this the negativity bias). This becomes a recipe for generating stress (high states of sympathetic activation), overwhelm and collapse (dorsal vagal shut down states) and attracting the very things we are wanting to avoid.

What happens when do you turn your attention to the things in your life that support and nurture you, that are working, that bring you connection, satisfaction, and that you are grateful for and appreciate? Can you notice, feel and take in the little things in your life that bring pleasure and goodness e.g. the feeling of sun on your skin, the sound of birds or rain in a room, a beautiful flower, a delicious meal, the comfort of your bed, the support of the seat, the satisfaction of the pause at the end of an out-breath, someone's warm eyes and smile, a nice complement.

This brings us into a state of safety and connection, mediated by the ventral vagal complex. Spend some time and think of (or write down) all the inner and outer supports you have in your life that resource you. This maybe animals, places of nature, activities that you enjoy or people that you care for and feel cared by. Then let yourself bring up one of these images and allow yourself to remember via all your senses (sight, sound, smell etc) the last time you experienced this resource. Let yourself relive the feeling of this and then notice how your body responds for 30 seconds or more. Often this practice allows the body to relax, become more grounded and helps discharge stress. See if you

can make it a practice to regularly 'take in the good'. The more time you are able to bring regulation into the nervous system.

3. Nurture your relationships – The need for human connection and attachment is considered by many to be our deepest most fundamental human need. Research has found that being connected is one of the greatest protective factors against physical, emotional and spiritual dis-ease. Hence it can help to develop some skills to nurture your relationships via learning to communicate, listen and repair ruptures well. It can make a huge difference if we can find one or two people in our life that we can trust enough to be authentic, vulnerable and open with e.g to express your fears, hopes and needs with.

Vulnerability and authenticity is the birthplace of intimacy, true belonging and courage, and you can only truly belong if you are willing to be authentic and risk showing your vulnerability. This practice requires you to be willing to work on accepting yourself! Do you express your needs for support, or let in support when it is offered to you? Can you risk expressing your boundaries, needs, feelings and thoughts with people close to you in a clear non-reactive way? Do you also show interest and listen to others with an open, curious, non-judgemental heart without going into defensiveness, justification and explanation? Can you repair a rupture in a friendship or relationship by deep listening, saying sorry, forgiving someone for being imperfect or acknowledging and own your part in a conflict or disagreement without getting defensive or blaming of the other. These basic skills can make a huge difference to the quality of your relationship.

4. Befriend your emotions – Michael Brown says we need to 'get better at feeling, rather than trying to feel better'. So, how do you normally relate with your emotions? Do you fight, judge, hold onto, or try to fix or figure out your feelings in an attempt to control, overcome or reject them? These are common ways we relate to our emotions, that often perpetuates them into deeper layers of suffering.

However, paradoxically when we can learn to stay fully present to our feelings in our body (without going into our minds and associated

memories and stories), by recognising and allowing them, we often discover that they tend to flow through us in waves, often in a matter of a few minutes. They arise, peak and then subside. However, when we fight, over identify with and struggle with our feelings they often get stuck and congeal into dense and heavy moods, that over time become traits and identities (I'm a sad person) rather than passing states.

As the Buddhists say, suffering is the avoidance of pain. What we resist persists and we give power too! When you avoid your feelings they don't just disappear, they go down into the basement and pump iron, getting even stronger! Noticing and naming our feelings gets our frontal lobes on line and calms down the reptilian 'emotion driven' primitive part of our brain. When we can name it, we can tame it and when we can see it, we don't have to be it. However, *the practice of staying with our disturbing experience is counter-instinctual and counter-cultural.*

Our conditioned and natural instinct for most of us is to seek positive experiences, get away from painful feelings and sensations, or else to marinate in our thoughts (over analyse and over think) about why we are feeling this way and how to resolve or fix it. These approaches with our feelings tend to keep us looping on the hamster wheel going around and round in circles without any change.

However, the path of growth involves learning to become aware of and then to '*be present with*' these unpleasant sensations and emotions (*often in a titrated and safe way at first*), to breathe into and hang with them, without getting caught up in any analysis or any story about them. -e.g. "*Why am I feeling this way*"; "*There's something wrong with me*", "*I shouldn't be feeling this way*", or remembering all the other memories and associations of feeling this way. Can you do the counter-instinctual move to recognise, name, allow and be present to the intensity of these painful feelings and sensations, and refrain from any attempt to go into your thoughts about them e.g. figuring them out, judging them, fixing or jumping to conclusions about them.

Once named, we can even let go of the label, and simply sit with the intense wave of our feelings at the sensation level and let the wisdom and natural action tendency inherent within the feeling flow through us to completion. To go one step deeper, listen to the message in your feelings – what are they here to tell you- about what you need, what's out of balance, or what needs attention or completion?

Also keep in mind, that more often than not, some of the intensity of the feeling you may have about a current person (or trigger) maybe because something in your implicit memory from the past has been activated without you knowing it. Its what we could call a double wammy. Hence, it can also be very important to ask the question when your triggered, *'is anything in the present moment upset reminding me of something in my past that is still unresolved and amplifying my reaction'*? This process takes a lot of commitment to self- inquiry, curiosity, love for the truth, courage and self- compassion.

However, the more we can do this, the less likely we are to be reactive and to confuse and project our history into and with the present moment. Terry real says – *'there is no such thing as an over- reaction. Its just that what you're reacting too is behind you rather than in front of you'*! In my view, true unconditional confidence comes from befriending and owning all of our feelings and experience. If we are not afraid of our feelings, we are no longer afraid of life, because facing life fully requires feeling fully. The only way out is through!

5. Become embodied – When we inhabit our bodies, we inhabit ourselves. When we can live more and more in our bodies, we gain access to deeper levels of awareness, realness, wisdom, groundedness, emotional intelligence and aliveness. The belly and internal organs (viscera) have millions of neural fibres webbed through them, that send information back to the brain about what we feel, desire and need.

This is called the enteric nervous system (known as the second brain), and it is this 'gut feeling' that lets us know if we feel safe, threatened, happy, sad, angry or connected before any thoughts kick in. The body is the place where we discover our experiential truth, and is the launching place of true aliveness, presence and change. When we

sense our feelings in our body, the natural dynamism of the feeling will unfold, leading us to right action and or to a natural sense of completion and release.

Insight alone often doesn't lead to change. But learning to deeply feel, and sense our bodies leads to natural change. Why? Because, if we are numbed out, and disconnected from our bodies we have little access to our sensations and feelings, which are the vital information that navigates us through life and tells us what we need, value or is out of balance.

Without this body awareness, we are at risk of becoming lost, and only guided by our rational, over civilized, conditioned mind, which is often full of should's, "supposed too's", concepts and rules that have been internalized by our culture and families. We are at risk of becoming one dimensional, black and white and living from our conditioning rather than the organic aliveness of our bodies and feelings.

Also, when we can locate and notice our feelings in our body, we often discover our feelings become a lot more tolerable and contained. So when you're angry, sad or happy, ask yourself "How do I know I'm angry, sad or happy". "Is there a place in my body where I feel this?", and "can I allow this to be here for now and let it spread into my arms and legs and whole body?" Body awareness gives us a break from being lost in our thoughts, brings us into the NOW, connects us to our senses, slows us down and helps our emotions become more contained and manageable, so that we can then listen to them and use them as guides for right action.

6. Investigate your beliefs and identities – Shakespeare once said "*There is nothing inherently right or wrong, but thinking makes it so*". It's not just what happens to us that creates pain, so much as the meaning we make of it. It is our perspective, attitude and meaning that we give to the inevitable pain and joys of life that most profoundly shapes our experience. This means we have a lot more capacity to influence and have agency over our levels of suffering and experience than we have ever imagined. This is empowering and gives us more freedom !

One of the primary obstacles to reaching our goals, and the causes of human suffering is that we believe our thoughts to be true without ever questioning them. Secondly, when we identify with our mind and thoughts too much, we confuse them with reality and start to believe we are our thoughts. We end up living above our eyebrows, fused with our mind without any awareness of our bodies and senses. This leads us to become ungrounded and disconnected from our bodies and the here and now. Much of our distress is the result of either being lost in our thoughts and living in our heads, and not investigating our mind and how it works – our familiar, taken for granted (but often outdated or inaccurate) assumptions, thoughts, favourite self-images, deeply held beliefs and expectations about ourselves, others and the world e.g. That I should be perfect, beautiful, strong, smart, successful. If I make a mistake I'm a failure.

When we believe the stories we tell ourselves (about ourselves and the world) without awareness and investigation, we are much more likely to suffer from depression, anger, anxiety and symptoms of stress e.g. body tension, somatic complaints such as headaches. Begin to get into the habit of observing your thoughts regularly. If your thoughts patterns(e.g worrying, catastrophizing, ruminating, jumping to conclusions, mind reading) are observed as limiting, negative and unhelpful, perhaps you can practice not giving them attention (see them as if they are just sounds passing by) and letting them go! If you find that you want to hold onto your thoughts and beliefs about yourself, reality, change and others be curious about what it does for you to hold onto these beliefs. Is there a self-image that these thoughts are strengthening?

What do you get out believing the story your telling yourself? What is its secondary gain, and what is the risk if you let the story go? Secondly, see if you can start to identify and question your taken for granted beliefs about yourself, others and the world, or what your 'inner critic' tells you. When you're triggered and feeling off balance, be curious – *what is your mind telling you about yourself, others and the world?* Then inquire 1) Am I 100% sure this belief is true? 2) How does it effect me when I believe it to be true 3) Is this belief/story or self-judgment helping or serving me in any way? 4) What would be different if I let this thought/story go? 5) Who would I be if I no longer believed this thought or story? 6) What do I want to believe that would be more self-compassionate, honest and empowering?

7. Know your patterns – “*Between a stimulus and a response is a gap. And in that gap lies your power and your freedom*” (Victor Frankle). Knowing our patterns means knowing how we typically think, relate and behave in unaware, over used, and automatic ways. Often these habitual patterns were once our best, most adaptive and intelligent attempts to be connected or cope with life's challenges given the resources and awareness we had at the time.

Problems develop when these once, relational or behavioural solutions to life's challenges become fixed, out of date, automatic, reactive and without choice. For example, on the level of thinking, we may have habitual thought patterns (tendencies) to either worry, ruminate about the past, over plan, or predict the future (expecting rejection or danger), or self-criticize. At a behavioural or relational level we may have habitual patterns of pleasing, accommodating and appeasing; freezing- collapsing and becoming paralyzed; perfecting – over-achieving or over working; fighting – controlling, blaming aggressing against others or ourselves; fleeing – procrastinating, isolating, or withdrawing from others; or attaching – clinging to others in order to be rescued.

When we can get curious, know and understand our habitual and conditioned patterns, how they developed, how they serve and cost us, we are in a much better position to notice them without being hijacked by them. We can then choose to let them go and make a fresher more conscious choice about where we want to put our attention, how we want to behave or respond to a situation.

On a practice level, if you want to change a pattern this is what you can do.

Begin by observing the earliest warning signs when you are triggered into a typical cognitive, relational or behavioural pattern (e.g. binge drinking or comfort eating) as it is happening. Immediately pause, come into the here and now, ground yourself into your breath and feet on earth. Consciously slow down. Invite in your curiosity. Notice what was the trigger? Was it a thought, emotion, person or an event? Notice the impulse to go into the pattern (without acting on it) and become curious about how the pattern is trying to serve you? What is the need you are you trying to meet via engaging in the pattern e.g. safety, relaxation, protection, control, security, or confidence (just to name a few), and what feeling the pattern is helping you avoid sitting with?

Be curious and take a moment to be aware of how the pattern costs you emotionally, physically, relationally now and in the future, especially as it is happening in the moment. Then mindfully name, witness and allow what thoughts/stories (interpretations of the event), emotions and body sensations that go with the pattern. Notice how they naturally change if you just watch them. See if you can notice the thoughts/stories e.g I'm having the thought, that fuels the pattern (see investigating beliefs), and then allow and befriend any feelings or sensations that also drive or get activated in the pattern (see befriending your emotions). The more you can slow down and observe the automatic sequence between the trigger and your thoughts, emergent feelings, body sensations and habitual behavioural impulses the more you have awareness and choice to intervene with a new mindset, way of paying attention, managing your emotions, regulating your sensations, taking action or communicating your needs. This is where our true freedom lies.

8. Experiment with the new – Experimenting is a way interrupting fixed patterns (fixed conditioned ways of acting, managing our experience, thinking, feeling etc) and trying something new experientially instead of just talking about something intellectually. Experiments lead to an expansion of choice, behaviours and possibility. **Ideas don't lead to change – practice does!** Experiments involve creating new input via new ways of paying attention, focussing energy, imagining, visualizing, sensing, moving or acting. The idea is that new behaviour or experience leads to new outcomes, which in turn contradicts and updates our old self-concepts and core beliefs about self, others and the world. This then leads to new neural firing patterns and brain circuits which become new traits in our personality. Neuroscientists call this process of using our mind to change our brain, to change our mind – self directed neuro-plasticity.

Recent neuroscience findings now know that part of change is consciously recognizing in the moment (which takes mindfulness) and then refraining from acting on old learnt patterns, and trying out new behaviours and ways of paying attention, or being with ourselves and others. This is LEARNING via DOING. Once you know your familiar patterns, have new resources and have connected with your intentions you are in a good position to disturb your homeostasis (in a manageable way!) and try something new!

Through trial and error, try out a new way of thinking, behaving and relating that will help you step out of your comfort zone and move in the direction of your deeper needs, values and intentions. e.g. What happens if you say to yourself “I did the best I could”, or you take a deep breath and open your shoulders, if you say yes to an invitation instead of No, if you risk expressing your needs, boundaries and feelings? Experimenting with the new helps us become more flexible, choiceful and adaptive to the demands of the present and breaks us out of our old, out of date and conditioned ways of being. As they say in an Everything but the girl song, “*We find out what we are made of by facing what we are afraid of*”. What risk can you take today that will help you move forward in your life and into your growth zone?

9. Appreciate your context – We do not live in a vacuum! To fully understand the meaning of our experience and behaviour it can help to understand the whole situation that we are or have been in and how it is impacting on us. We are highly inter-dependent beings that are constantly shaping and being shaped by the world conditions (political, environmental, social) around us, in ways that are often out of our awareness.

In Gestalt therapy, there is a saying that says – *change doesn't happen without a new support!* What supports exist in your environment that you can reach out too and access that may help you cope better, become more resilient and feel less alone. When we see the context we swim in, we are also in a better position to see what is or was perhaps 'too much' or 'too little' in our environment now or in the past that has shaped our current struggles, beliefs or symptoms.

Seeing how our environment and history has impacted on us often helps us break out of a common tendency to shame and blame ourselves for our problems in ways that keep us mired in guilt or self-hatred, and opens up the possibility of self-compassion, self-forgiveness and healing. This perspective can support us to bring greater dignity, compassion and forgiveness towards our own and others limitations and humanity. Often our current symptoms (e.g anxiety or depression) are normal human effects from being in abnormal, unsupportive, chronically stressful or traumatic situations! In a more practical way, appreciating our context involves becoming aware of the people, events and conditions that trigger us into our emotional reactivity, beliefs, implicit memories and patterns. When we

have this awareness, again then we have more choice in how to respond.

10. Discover your presence – Most of the time, we have a tendency to put all of our attention into our thoughts, feelings or perceptions, and then mistake our thoughts and beliefs for the facts, and for who we are (as Decartes said, "I think therefore I am!"). This becomes a case of mistaken identity! Discovering your spirit or presence means coming to realize that your true nature is much vaster, more spacious and open than any idea, thought or concept you have never had about yourself and who you are.

Thoughts are just pictures, words or sound bites floating in the space of your awareness. How can these constantly changing thoughts define the totality of who you are! It is your natural awareness that was, is and will always be here prior to any story about yourself and the world. This awareness is here before, during and after all your thoughts, feelings and perceptions come and go.

You don't need to seek it, as its already here right now! Discovering your spirit means first finding out who you are not, and then discovering that who you really are at the core, is independent of thought all together. At the deepest levels you are the spacious awareness that knows (witnesses) your thoughts, feelings and perception, but are not defined by them. Why, because all these are impermanent phenomena that come and go.

The one thing that is always here is the simple fact of your awareness and being-ness. It's like the sky behind the clouds. It is always there, even when there are heavy clouds. It is never affected by the clouds, and is not threatened by or attached to the clouds. Your awareness is like the sky. It is vast, open, accepting and free. Ask yourself "Am I aware". How do you know? Where do you have to put your attention to know your aware? You don't have to put it anywhere, because its already naturally here! Its what's looking through your eyes, observing your thoughts and hearing through your ears!

To cultivate this level of awareness requires regularly practicing bringing your attention into the here and now e.g. via your senses. Through this regular practice we can begin to experience the deeper presence of natural awareness. Why does cultivating this level of presence matter? Because this awareness is naturally accepting, open,

peaceful, curious and compassionate. It is the deepest source of happiness and peace that is not hitched to an idea of a better future to feel complete, or the circumstances of our environment to feel OK.

Peace & Blessing,

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