

Personal Growth Series: [Take Action to Conquer Fear of Change](#)

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Life happens, as the advertisers would tell us, and with it we experience change. Sometimes that change is by choice and sometimes it is unexpected. Sometimes life changes occur as a normal by-product of the passage of time and sometimes changes even occur because of “nonevents,” when the expected doesn’t happen. Regardless of its genesis, change is never easy and most of us find it difficult to take action in order to move forward, particularly when our transitions are unexpected and the loss they incorporate leave us spinning and looking for some semblance of control over our future.

Many factors block us from taking needed action to get back on course. Low self-esteem may keep us from believing that we can do what we need to do. We may feel immobilized by an inability to see our alternatives. We may feel indignant about letting go of how things were (even if they certainly weren’t perfect before). We may be stuck by “the curse of perfectionism” as we set impossibly high expectations for ourselves. The factor that I want to discuss in this article is what I see most often in my career counseling practice: feeling stuck because of fear.

The best approach to dealing with fear is to recognize that we can’t just wait for it to go away. It most likely never will and so we need to learn how to manage it. At its most basic level, fear has to do with stepping outside of our comfort zone and I think the most important perspective in this regard is that (thankfully) meaningful change will occur as the result of the cumulative effect of many small steps. It might, for instance, feel like Mt. Everest to you to think about going on a job interview if you are someone who needs to go to work. But it might not seem so daunting to think of connecting with a very close friend in order to practice talking about yourself and which of your strengths might potentially transfer over to a work situation.

Another strategy for taking the edge off of fear is to carefully prepare before you try something new. Research as much as you can about a person you need to connect with or a resource you need to find. Rehearse and practice what you will say. Visualize the task you are about to accomplish with a positive outcome so that you can replace your anxiety with possible seeds of success. Remember that research shows that only about 10% of what we worry about happens so try to concentrate on the 90% that is the more likely result of your efforts.

Remember the basics of risk-taking. Starting with small risks is a good example of this. So also is not risking a lot to gain a little. Make peace with the possibility of mistakes, remembering the old saying that “some people never do anything wrong, because they never do anything at all.” Indeed sometimes it is more of a risk to actually do nothing at all and the impact of making a mistake might be less than the impact of not taking action.

Mobilize your support system even though your instinct during a period of transition might be to isolate yourself. Make an effort to spend time with those people in your life who make you feel good about yourself. Likewise minimize contact with toxic people.

Barbara Sher is an author who writes about transformational change. One of her best ideas is what she calls “task therapy.” She tells us to “do it right, do it wrong, but just do it.” Taking action in and of itself can indeed be the best antidote to the fear inherent in change and a tremendous help to us as we respond to life’s challenges.

Homework to overpower the fear of a change:

We are often told to *think positive*, but if you find yourself very stuck with your impulse to resist a possible change, try taking the *opposite* approach instead!

1. Take a pad of paper, find a quiet space for 15-20 minutes and ask yourself, “what will happen if..... (insert the change)?” Think in terms of possible outcomes, and list as many and as broad a list as possible.
2. When you have a most “terrifying” list, ask, “then what”? Again, list as many outcomes as you can think of as remotely possible.
3. You may be amazed at the *silver linings* you can begin to envision when you let yourself really “go there” and unleash your known, and hidden, fears. Miraculously, naming your fears takes some of the power away and shifts your energy towards asking what **is** possible?

Trust that no matter the change, you will be able to not only survive, but most likely, even thrive!

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Bonnie Miller is a licensed professional counselor with over twenty years of experience planning, delivering and managing services designed to promote personal growth and career effectiveness. Bonnie served as the director of the Women's Resource Center of the University of Richmond and also provided career counseling, teaching and consulting services for the Center. She has worked in career development at Duke University, University of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Richmond. Bonnie is a past president of the Greater Richmond Chapter of the American Society for Training and Development. She has an undergraduate degree from Mary Baldwin College and a master's degree from Duke University. Her website address is: www.brownmiller.com