

## So You Want to Make a Change

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Something in your life needs to change. A relationship is not satisfying. Your spending and saving habits need work. You want a higher paying or more gratifying job. Your doctor tells you to change health habits. You want more time for things that you enjoy. You feel “stressed out” too often. You want to change the way you think, feel, or act about something that seems beyond your control. Whatever change is needed in your life—you feel you are finally ready to take some action.

### Examine what you value in life.

*What you value is at the base of your behavior and decisions.* Living in a way that reflects your values is satisfying. When you aren't living in a manner that reflects your values, you feel unhappy. It's that simple.

Values are essential part to successfully making a change . You are more likely to take action on a desired change that reflects your life's values. If you want to make a change, it makes sense to ask yourself the following value clarifying question: What is it that makes me want to do the things I do?

You are examining what you value—the core of what makes you happy—when you ask this question. You are also looking at what motivates you to take action. Here are three examples of values and how they may effect someone's life:

- You may value independence.  
Valuing independence would mean you may be most satisfied when you are able to create and manage your life as you see fit.

- You may value security.  
If so, you may be most satisfied when you create and manage your life in a way that makes you feel safe.
- You may value giving and receiving love.  
If you are a person who holds this value, you will feel most satisfied when involved in caring relationships.

Once your values are identified, ask: What changes would help me live a life that reflects my values? Let's use the last example provided above to examine change in relation to values.

*Knowing that you value the act of loving and being loved may mean a change in how you interact with others. You may be motivated to develop and work on a plan to learn skills to improve communication with family members and friends.*

Changing is often hard. But, by linking values to planned change, the change becomes more desirable. The process of change will also be more joyful for you. Remember the link between what is important to you and what you are trying to accomplish – this will help you manage barriers to change that arise.



## Be honest with yourself.

Honesty is a *critical element* if the process of change is to be successful. Sometimes, it is difficult to be really honest with ourselves. After a busy day, who has energy to evaluate whether or not we are really doing what we say we want to do? It takes valuable time to reflect on these things. Sometimes there isn't even time to relax! However, if you are serious about making change, you'll take the time to ask yourself questions and listen to the answers.

Questions to ask when beginning the process of change:

### Do I really want to make the change?

Or, is this a change that someone else says I should make. Am I just going along with the suggestion? If your effort to change is to succeed, you must be committed to it.

### Have I tried to make this change before?

If the answer to this question is yes, ask yourself:

What are the barriers that have stopped me from making the change?

How can I overcome barriers this time?

### What personal resources may I need to strengthen so that it is easier to make this change?

After you begin to make the change, ask yourself the additional questions listed below. The answers should help you evaluate the change-making process.

### Is my plan to change working?

### Am I resenting something about making the change?

### What could I do to address the problems that have risen during the change-making process?

Problems could be falling back into old patterns, not adhering to action steps of my plan to change, and feeling discouraged, angry, resentful, or unmotivated about my plan.

Being honest with yourself takes more than time—it also takes *courage*. You may be pleased with answers to the questions you ask yourself, or you may not be pleased at all. It takes courage to ask the tough questions because you may fear the answers.

## Gather information from reputable sources.

Gaining the knowledge and skills you need to go about making change is a very smart move. No one wants to reinvent the wheel or feel they are set adrift without a map.

Whether you are choosing to change in the area of relationships, personal well being (time and stress management, diet and exercise, personal growth), or financial management, obtaining reliable information is important. Information sources are expanding at an astounding rate. Unfortunately, not all information is accurate.

Evaluate the reliability of your sources. Reliable information can be found on Cooperative Extension, government, and university web sites; as well as reputable commercial web sites, and in books, magazines, and other publications. Counselors and advisors can provide reliable information, too.

## **Commit to the change process by setting goals and designing action plans.**

A process is needed for you to move from a wish, such as “I wish I had more time to spend with my family or myself” to having it happen. Turning wish into reality requires setting goals and taking action.

As with each of the other steps to success, this step takes effort. As the popular saying goes, “*We don’t plan to fail, we fail to plan.*” Successfully changing something doesn’t just happen. You need a plan. However, according to *Goal Setting*, a publication of the American Management Association: “Few of us make goal setting a priority. In fact, studies show that most people either do not know what they want from life or, if they do, have no plans for realizing their dreams. Only a small percentage of people have specific, well-defined goals. And those people who most frequently reach their goals are those who write them down and develop the plans to reach them.”

Get a piece of paper. It’s time to begin your journey toward change. To move forward effectively, you need to set specific, realistic, and measurable goals. Once you have written your goal, brainstorm ways of accomplishing that goal. Be creative! When you are finished, you will have written a set of clear and concise action steps toward achieving your goal.

You should also decide on a way to keep track of your progress toward the goal. It will also help if you develop a reward system to use along the way. For in-depth information on these and other topics, order Rutgers Cooperative Extension facts sheets, **Making A**

**Change: Priorities, Goal Setting, and Action**, (FS983), and **Making A Change: Keys to Success**, (FS984).

## **Look and ask for support.**

Who will help you reach your goal? Who will be “in your corner” and who may resist or derail your efforts to change? When you answer these questions, you are identifying your support system. To reach and maintain major goals, you will likely need the support and encouragement of others.

The extent to which long term or intimate partners at home support your change is particularly important. Your change process is likely to affect people close to you one way or another. Your broader support system can be made up of select individuals within the multiple networks you have: family, friend, community, work, and professionals (physician, psychologist, financial advisor).

Choose your support system wisely. You will need individuals who will help you evaluate your progress, provide positive feedback, be part of your reward system, and encourage and listen when you need it. Then, tell your supporters about your goal(s) and action plan(s). Explain how they can help.

You may even ask supporters to change their behavior. For example, you may ask someone to exercise with you. You might ask supporters to refrain from some activity or behavior when you are in their presence. Remember that it is their choice to change or not to change *their* behavior. You must focus on the changes you choose to make. Don’t barrage others with guilt and shame if they choose not to change.

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