

# Overcoming your fear of change

Dealing with the unknown doesn't have to be terrifying. Try these six simple strategies and take the fear factor out of change.

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**CHANGE CAN BE SCARY.** People stay in jobs they hate, endure relationships they don't want, keep unhealthy habits and stick to the same routine day in, day out, week after week and year after year. According to The Happiness Institute's Jen Knutson – a wellness coach with master's degrees in psychology and health education – this is because “we don't like the instability that change can create”.

Some of the biggest changes experienced during a lifetime include the birth of a baby, a relationship starting or ending, death, moving house, starting a new job, losing a job, retiring, becoming an empty-nester, ageing, a decline in health or quitting a

substance – encompassing anything from alcohol to sugar. Some of these events we bring on ourselves; others are out of our control. “Change forces us to adjust to the new, and this is out of our comfort zone,” explains Sydney-based clinical psychologist Dr Cindy Nour.

Change can impact our lives both positively and negatively. While it can lead to heightened levels of self-doubt, guilt and sadness – and even bring on negative coping strategies, such as comfort eating, alcoholism or smoking – change can also engender feelings of empowerment, hope, productivity, strength, satisfaction and pride. To help you channel the good in change, our experts recommend these six steps.

## 1 Accept the idea of change

Despite the potential pitfalls, Knutson believes humans are built to cope with change. “Change is inevitable, so we have to accept the idea of it,” she says, adding that, while change might happen at inconvenient times, you must try to be flexible when it comes your way.

Dr Nour agrees, explaining that resistance to change can actually hinder your ability to not only come to terms with the idea of change, but to deal with the change itself. “This is because resistance could be a sign of being stuck in a rut,” she says. “Feeling stuck can reduce your ability to be creative and to solve a situation that needs a change.”

## 2 Take smaller steps

When faced with change, instead of looking at the big and overwhelming picture, look at the smaller pieces of the puzzle. “Break things down into less threatening pieces, and take short-term steps that

will result in long-term change,” suggests Knutson. “Small changes will often help you become accustomed to long-term change. For example, if you want to lose 50 kilograms, break it down into 10 lots of five-kilogram goals instead.”

## 3 Believe in yourself

“You need to believe in yourself and have faith in your abilities to handle a variety of situations,” says Knutson. She advises focusing on your strengths and calling on them when uncomfortable situations or times of change occur.

## 4 Approach it differently

“Try looking at the situation from a different perspective,” suggests Knutson. “Work through the pros and cons, then acknowledge the cons but focus on the pros and be excited about the possibilities. Change can be exciting – it is what we make of it that makes the difference.”

Dr Nour agrees. “Try to see problems as challenges instead of threats,” she says. “If you are afraid of change, your immediate reaction is to see a threat in anything that's different to what you're used to. So, you tend to stick with what you know, even if it is not serving you well.”

## 5 Develop a sense of optimism

“Anxiety gets in the way of change and results in us avoiding the things that we need to change in our lives,” says Dr Nour. “This is called learnt helplessness: people learn to be helpless in life so they don't have to make changes. Learnt optimism is the opposite of this, whereby through life's experiences, you learn to be positive.”

To channel learnt optimism, Dr Nour recommends releasing perfectionist

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## Helping hand

All changes present challenges, and sometimes that can make it difficult to cope. As such, it's important to have access to support if times get tough.

- To find a psychologist near you, visit [psychology.org.au](http://psychology.org.au), or visit your GP for a referral.
- For those aged under 25 and experiencing difficulties, visit [reachout.com](http://reachout.com) for help and guidance.
- For anyone needing support or advice for depression or anxiety, visit [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au) or call 1300 224 636.
- If facing a mental health emergency, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

tendencies, developing a less black-and-white way of thinking and setting realistic expectations.

## 6 Investigate your values

One way to confront change, says Knutson, is to work out what your personal values are, as these can guide your decision-making. She offers the example of a vegetarian wanting to lose weight, but is told that to do so, they must eat a high-protein diet of meat and poultry. “When change is not aligned with our values, it makes it harder to deal with,” she warns. “This can lead to a sense of ambivalence, where it's hard to be motivated to do anything at all.”