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## READY FOR A CHANGE?

Trying something new in your job, your workout or your relationship can reenergize your life. Here's how to take the risks that can be truly transformative.

By Kimberly Goad

Photographs by Bonnie Holland







Optimistic people who are receptive to change are not only happier but also healthier, mentally and physically.

**Kalyn Johnson was a successful 34-year-old attorney at a major New York City law firm.**

It was the career path she'd always dreamed of, and yet she could count on one finger the number of days she'd been happy on the job. After listening to Kalyn talk about how unfulfilled she was, a friend made a radical suggestion: Strangers were always complimenting Kalyn's style. Why didn't she quit the law firm and launch a business as a wardrobe consultant? The idea of making a career switch intrigued Kalyn, but it also terrified her. "I saw it as a choice between practicing law while maintaining an upscale lifestyle or scraping by as an entrepreneur," she says. "I didn't know if I could do it."

That's the thing about change: We're all for it when it doesn't involve much risk or it's something that instantly makes us happy, like going on vacation. Otherwise, experts say, we're pretty much content to stay safely within the confines of the status quo. "People want to keep doing what's familiar because they know where that goes," says Marion Jacobs, Ph.D.,

adjunct professor emerita of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *Take-Charge Living*. "All kinds of fears underlie the prospect of change—fear of failure, fear of something horrible happening. People resist change, even if what they're currently doing isn't working, because the unknown is scarier."

Yet change is necessary to take the next step in life. Without it, your workout regimen would become less effective; your job would no longer challenge you; your relationships would be stuck in a *Groundhog Day*-like time warp. "I tell my clients, 'If you're not changing, you're not learning,'" says Maryann Troiani, a psychologist in Barrington, Illinois, and coauthor of *Spontaneous Optimism*. "Going through change allows you to grow."

Research suggests that optimists who are receptive to change are not only happier but also healthier, mentally and physically. Change resisters and pessimistic people have trouble dealing with stress, are more likely to suffer from depression and get sick more often. "It's a

negative cycle: Perceiving change as something to be feared leaves people stuck in an unhealthy situation, which can then lead to depression, which in turn makes change feel more frightening," Troiani says. "You need to frame it as an exciting challenge, rather than a hurdle to overcome," Jacobs adds.

Ready to be a change maker? Here's how to get in the game.

## Seize the Situation

If you're waiting for the perfect moment to make a change, don't bother, experts say. There is no such thing. "If there were, you would've already done it," Jacobs points out.

Instead, try this exercise. Write down the answer to each question before moving on to the next one.

**What do I want in my life right now that is missing?**

**How would I feel in five years if I didn't have this in my life?**

**Why haven't I made this change already?**

"Once you've answered these questions, that's the moment to go for it—while you're tapped into the

positive emotions and excitement," Troiani says. But "going for it" doesn't necessarily mean doing a 180-degree turnaround tomorrow. "Start small to ease the anxiety," she suggests. "Want a change in career, but not ready to leave your job? Take a class to find out if the new field is a good fit. Testing the waters will make you feel informed, and that will motivate you to continue."

## Make a Plan

For Kalyn Johnson, it took just a few more unhappy months at her law firm to convince her that there was no harm in moonlighting as a wardrobe consultant. She ordered business cards to pass out the next time someone stopped her and asked where she got her scarf or pair of boots. Within days, she had two clients. What she didn't have was a business strategy, and she soon became overwhelmed

by the demands of juggling her legal job and the wardrobe consultant gig.

“People want change to be quick and easy, but it is a process,” Jacobs says. “You need a plan to guide you.”

Write down your goal and be as specific as possible. Below it, make two lists: one detailing the steps you’ll have to take to reach your objective; the other listing the obstacles you’re likely to run into and how you’re going to deal with each one.

“If your goal is to lose 25 pounds, make sure you have a contingency plan to get you over the hurdles,” Jacobs says. “What are you going to do at your mother’s house when she pushes food

on you? If you have tactics in place, you’re more likely to succeed.”

Before Kalyn started her business, she built her confidence as she developed her idea. She quit the law firm and started spending time with a local group of entrepreneurs for their feedback. She made tweaks to her concept based on their suggestions, and in 2008 she launched Styling by Kalyn Johnson. “Four years later I’m really enjoying the change, but I didn’t so much at first,” Kalyn, now 43, admits. “I was redefining myself, and I had to get comfortable with not knowing what was around the corner.”

## Prepare for Speed Bumps

At 29, Sascha Rothchild, a writer in Los Angeles, found herself single again after only two years of marriage. Somehow she managed to bypass the postdivorce period of mourning, and soon she was dating and experiencing a creative surge that led to a deal for her book *How to Get Divorced by 30*. By all outward appearances, Sascha had embraced change. But then one day, she was suddenly hit with an overwhelming sense of loss and sadness. “Whenever I was alone, I was overcome with panic

and anxiety,” she says.

The moral of her story: Just when you think you’re weathering change, stress can sneak up from behind and prove otherwise. “Hormones released by the body in response to stress impair the areas of your brain that adapt to change,” explains researcher Michael Schlund, Ph.D., assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore. “So when you’re under stress, your brain has a harder time accepting change and instead favors the familiar.”

Rather than giving up and going back to the old

way of doing things, double your commitment to recent changes. “The way to keep a new habit going is through positive reinforcement,” Troiani says. Reward yourself—download the book you’ve been wanting to read, for instance—when you make progress.

Also key is building a support system. Share your plan with two or three friends or family members you trust. Be sure that one of them can inspire you and another has been down a similar path and understands what you’re going through. Check in with them at least weekly. “Cheerleaders and advisers help you stay accountable,”

Troiani says. “And talking keeps you motivated.”

That’s what Sascha ultimately discovered. With the help of a therapist, she sorted out what went wrong in her marriage and how she could keep from making the same mistakes again. “The only way to welcome change is to decide exactly what needs to be changed,” she says. “If you can’t pinpoint what you don’t like about yourself, you can’t change it.”

Now happily remarried, Sascha knows that change is a journey. “Making lasting change comes down to three things,” Sascha says. “Practice, practice, practice.” ■

## Three Ways to Bust Your Rut

“So many people are stuck in place,” says Maryann Troiani, a psychologist in Barrington, Illinois. Try these tips to outsmart the fear that’s holding you back.

● **Stop dwelling on the negative.** Say that you’re contemplating a move to a new city. If you bog yourself down in the problems that could arise, you’ll end up too afraid to do anything. Instead, research the benefits to relocating. Then visit the city several times to make sure you’ll like it there. “Changing your focus from the cons to the pros is energizing,” Troiani says.

● **Don’t make too many changes at once.** This is a common mistake—you move, change jobs and decide to train for your first half-marathon all at the same time. Too much life transformation can be exhausting, Troiani says. “Making one good change will inspire you to make more later,” she notes.

● **Give it enough time.** “Our brains are hardwired to change slowly,” says Marion Jacobs, Ph.D., adjunct professor emerita of psychology at UCLA. “Any new practice takes four to six weeks before it becomes a habit,” Troiani adds. So be patient and stick with your goal for at least a month. When you hit that point, congratulate yourself. You’ve changed for the better.