

Are You Ready for Change?

Necessary for successful change are the attitudes and qualities brought to the process rather than any technique you may follow, and these qualities have been known for millennia. These qualities were reviewed by health scientist and Buddhist practitioner Kelly McGonigal in her seminal work on the change process.¹ She refers to three qualities in particular implicated in change: *willingness*, *self-awareness* and *surrender*.

Being *willing* to tolerate what arises during the process of change is essential. Willingness requires courage to face what shows up and courage to deal with your doubts and any tendency to give in when things aren't changing as quickly as you wish. The inclination to remain on track and persist with your journey towards what you think is important despite inevitable setbacks is a measure of willingness. That change takes time and isn't always smooth and linear is important to remind yourself of so when a setback comes it doesn't floor you and result in loss of hope and motivation. Of course, hopeless thoughts and feelings will also arise from time-to-time and your willingness to experience them without yielding to them is also part of the change process.

Self-awareness is the second of Kelly McGonigal's qualities essential for the process of change. No change can occur without us being aware of the direction we wish our journey to take, but self-awareness goes much deeper. Self-awareness is about becoming conscious of your own inner landscape of thoughts and feelings and the impact these may have on your life and the change process itself. Being self-aware allows us to catch the emergence of self-defeating thoughts and beliefs that can easily impair our opportunity for change. Right mindfulness is an especially helpful way of cultivating self-awareness and in turn, conscious caring and wisdom. It literally lights the pathway and promotes insight into the things that keep us stuck. It opens new possibilities for movement along the pathway towards positive change.

The final of Kelly McGonigal's qualities is *surrender*. Surrender requires us to fully acknowledge that some elements in the process of change are not within our control. For instance, change at the micro (very small) and macro (very large) level happens whether we like it or not. Body cells die, weeds grow in the garden, new cars get scratched and rain falls on the very day you plan a picnic in the park for your daughter's eighth birthday. Likewise, our inner landscape of distressing thoughts and feelings is fluid and the feelings and behaviour of other people are typically beyond your control. Because "change alone is unchanging"² we ought to maintain an attitude that doesn't continue to butt heads with reality.

It is also important to mention another quality that can have a profound impact on the process of change. Often seen in medical and psychological literature, this quality occurs when a person has a strong belief or hope that a treatment program they are about to undertake will work for them. Research shows the greater the positive expectancy or optimism for a particular treatment the better is the outcome.³ Conversely, having a low expectancy for success or a high expectancy for failure predicts a poorer outcome.⁴ This is an effect of the mind's influence on the change process where positive expectancy neurologically primes the brain for success. This process is well established but often belittled and relegated to hocus-pocus by calling it the *placebo effect*. Yet, in truth, the effect is so striking that medical and psychological research studies have to control for it in order to justify any measured effects of a treatment, and sometimes the expectancy effects are found to be equal to or greater than the effect of the treatment itself.⁵ As we seek change, we have everything to gain and absolutely nothing to lose by holding in our minds both the direction change will take us and a healthy degree of optimism we will eventually arrive there.

¹ McGonigal, K. (2012). The neuroscience of change: A compassion-based program for personal transformation [Audiobook, Abridged Edition]. Sounds True, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.soundstrue.com/shop/3934.productdetails>

² Attributed to Heraclitus of Ephesus, c. 535 – c. 475 BCE.

³ eg. Kirsch, I. (2010). The emperor's new drugs: Exploding the antidepressant myth. London: Random House.

⁴ Beauregard, M. (2012). Brain wars: The scientific battle over the existence of the mind and the proof that will change the way we live our lives. New York: HarperOne.

⁵ Kirsch, 2010;

Rankin, L. (2014) Mind over medicine: Scientific proof that you can heal yourself. Sydney, Australia: Hay House

Whitaker, R. (2011). Anatomy of an epidemic: Magic bullets, psychiatric drugs and the astonishing rise of mental illness in America. New York: Broadway.