

Understanding Why We Change

Psychological theories have something to offer about how people change, but we may have something to learn from spiritual and religious traditions as well.

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How do people change? How do they make significant and long-lasting shifts that affect every aspect of their lives?

Learning something new, taking a different approach, or engaging with someone with a different perspective from your own can cause noticeable changes in your everyday life. Even just watching a movie or reading a book can alter your outlook to some extent. But change with a capital "C" -- the kind that changes your beliefs, motivations, behaviors, and general way of being across all aspects of your life seems to boil down to an essential shift in worldview -- a fundamental transformation in consciousness.

Psychological theories have something to offer about how people change, but we may have something to learn from spiritual and religious traditions as well. Embedded in these traditions are sophisticated models and methods for cultivating positive change that are unfortunately inaccessible to many because they are often entrenched in, and sometimes limited by, a specific esoteric philosophy or religious dogma.

One solution to this problem is to find out what commonalities exist across many different spiritual traditions, as well as across people from all walks of life who have experienced such dramatic changes, in hopes that some essential truth about the pathway toward positive change will emerge. In a series of studies, this is what we've done.

For more than a decade, our research at the [Institute of Noetic Sciences](#) has investigated transformations in consciousness. How do they happen? What are the facilitators? What are the barriers to transforming? We believe that the more we learn about this complex and mysterious process, the more successful we'll be in helping to cultivate positive transformation in individuals, our communities, and our institutions.

To this end, we have engaged in [a series of studies](#) that included analysis of individual narratives of personal transformations, focus groups, in-depth interviews with 60 representatives of ancient and modern transformative traditions, surveys of more than 2,000 people, and longitudinal studies of people engaged in spiritual and transformative practices.

This research led us to develop a working [model of consciousness transformation](#). While they are limited in their capacity to adequately address the complexity of an issue, models are useful because they provide a representational map of a phenomenon of interest. Just as geographical maps facilitate in-depth exploration of specific territories, this working model provides one way of framing the transformative process that we hope will guide further study.

The Noetic Sciences Change Model

I tried committing suicide and was found. That same year I started to do a 12-step program and some seminars. I worked with people who helped me have an awakening, where I heard a voice say to me that I am divine. Now I totally understand that I am a divine being having a human experience -- and my life is oriented around service to my community. (John, 45)

As I left the group and stepped onto this balcony, I walked into a world of unbelievable beauty. It was a brilliant day, the sun reflecting off the surf that broke on the rocks below. The shoreline extended south for miles, rock, sand, and waves, with the occasional seal. It was a breathtaking vista, completed by mountains just beyond the coast. I felt like the whole scene was smiling at me, awaiting my arrival, and I was flooded with contentment and the joy of feeling whole, of being blessed. It was as though I had walked through a sci-fi energy screen into a new world.

I am not a religious person, I am a very successful, highly rational businessman, but at that moment I experienced a profound spiritual awakening, an awareness that I was in a markedly altered state of being, a different reality. My awakening was this: we are all part of a single entity. I was part of all others and all others were part of me. I soared into this new awareness, losing all sense of myself as an individual. There is no me alone, only a universal us.

This great realization has vitally affected my life. Today, some forty years later, I am open to thoughts and moments of beauty and love in ways that I wasn't in my early life. I joyfully participate in the world of service. I speculate on spiritual questions and the mysteries of God and the universe. I am amazed by the majesty of the heavens at night and wonder at the magic of existence. I still live a full life as husband, father -- and now grandfather -- businessman, and social entrepreneur, but now I am also often awed by the marvel of being alive. (Richard, 70)

Whether it happens to an alcoholic hitting bottom, a soldier on the battlefield, a mother who has lost a child, or a businessman seized by a moment of wonder in nature, our research has identified a set of common factors in the transformative process -- clues indicating that while the process may be complex, it is not completely random and unpredictable.

A transformation in consciousness begins long before most people are aware that anything is changing. Genetics, environment, peak experiences, numinous or mystical moments, life transitions -- all these primers, even if not directly experienced as transformative, lay the groundwork for what is to come. Even when people can point to a pivotal moment in their transformative journey, they can often identify, in retrospect, what might be termed "destabilizers" -- a combination of factors that set the stage.

The result is a specific episode, period of life, or series of experiences that culminate in an aha! moment. Whether an encounter of stunning beauty or one of deep pain or loss, this "moment" challenges people's previous assumptions, leading them to change the way they see the world. Attempts to fit the new experiences or realizations into their old perspective fail, often forcing their awareness to expand to make room for the new insight.

This can lead to redoubled efforts to protect against further destabilization, but it can also lead to an entirely new worldview that is capable of giving meaning to what happened. Some find religion, others convert to a different religion, yet others reject religion altogether. They may move toward spiritual or philosophical inquiry, find a teacher that is familiar with this kind of experience, or join a community of like-minded people with whom it is safe to talk about what happened. Some get obsessed with continually chasing after new epiphanies, driven by a desire to repeat the original experience, always looking and never finding. However one responds, it often leads to the discovery of a set of practices that help to integrate new insights as the transformative path unfolds.

These practices can take many forms but include four essential elements: *attention* toward greater self-awareness; *intention* toward personal growth and benefit for the community; *repetition* of new behaviors; and *guidance* from trusted people who are experienced in the practice. At this point in the cycle, people often immerse themselves in the practices and over time face the challenge of finding ways to integrate these practices into everyday life. During this period, people are often tempted to isolate their practice from the rest of their life, but in doing so, they can inadvertently stall the transformative process by not allowing new patterns of thinking and behavior to suffuse each moment of each day. As the cycle continues, life itself eventually becomes the primary practice -- whether or not a formal practice remains a part of the process.

The next common challenge is that even when practice becomes integrated into everyday life, the process can remain a personal quest -- all about me or about achieving some outcome for personal benefit. In a goal-oriented culture, this is completely natural, but for growth and development to continue, true transformation appears to require that the process move from "I" to "we." In other words, as my practice infuses my life, I cannot help but wish for and actively work toward the transformation of my community. Altruism and compassion born of shared destiny rather than duty or obligation often emerge here.

At the same time, people can become so immersed in a sense of oneness and shared responsibility that they lose sight of the complementary movement from we to me. The results of this can range from a cult mentality to becoming so fatigued by helping others that people forget to care for themselves. Equally important as serving the community is discovering how best to channel our own unique combination of talents, resources, experiences, and skills in a way that serves our own well-being. Once that sweet dance between self-actualization and self-transcendence, formal and informal practice, and receiving and giving comes more naturally, people report an experience of existence that we call "living deeply."

From equanimity in the face of life's challenges to a daily sense of wonder and awe, even the most mundane aspects of life become sacred in their own way. And this way of living makes personal transformation contagious. As people share their experiences and their presence of being with others, a collective transformation that is more than the sum of its parts begins to emerge. Individual transformations combine to create collective transformation, which in turn stimulates more individual transformations, and so on in an ever-widening expansion of our human potential.

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*This article was co-authored by Marilyn Mandala Schlitz and Tina Amorok.
For more on our research on transformation, visit www.noetic.org and see the book [Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life](#).*