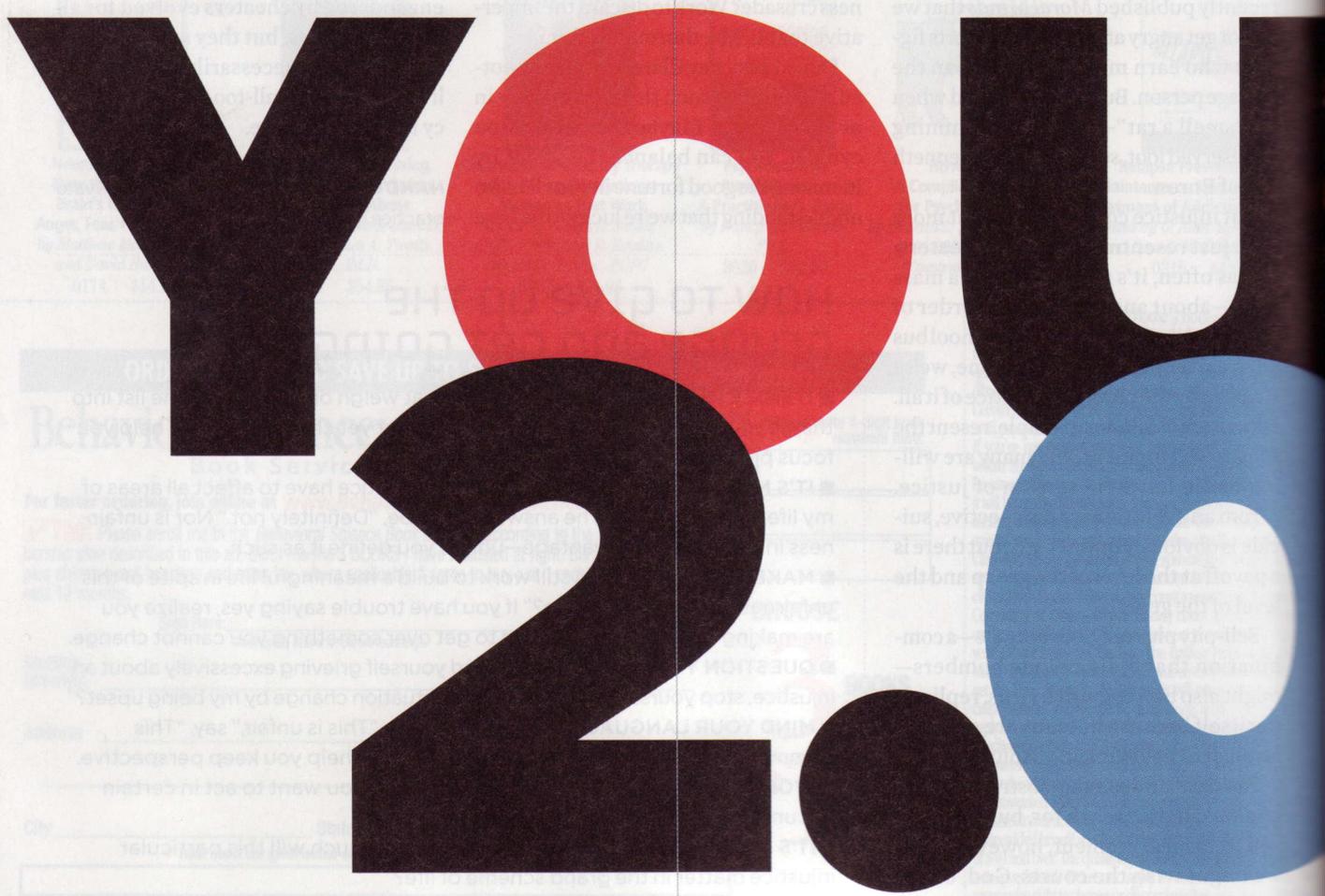


You may feel bound to your timid demeanor, your stifling job, or your rancorous relationship, but there is one realm over which you unquestionably have control: your own head. Herein, five principles of change to turn you into a self-starter.

By Carlin Flora * Photo Illustration by James Porto





1 You or Your World?

IF ONLY YOU had a more interesting job, lived in that charming old house across town, or were married to Dave instead of Tom—you'd be so much happier, right? Watch out: You may be projecting your inner turmoil outward. If that's the case, you'll feel dissatisfied no matter what your situation.

One way to distinguish the source of your discontent, says psychologist Barry Lubetkin, author of *Bailing Out*, is to comb over your history. If you're fed up with the supervisor you have now, honestly ask yourself, "Have I bristled at authority figures before?" Tweaking how you react to bosses generally could benefit you much more than trading this one in for a new model you'll soon detest just as much.

If you're agonizing about your job, recognize that work should reap rewards, but you may be expecting too many, says Robert Leahy, psychologist and author of *The Worry Cure*. "Everyone's entitled to be treated with dignity, but some people think their job should always be interesting and fair," he says. "You have to have more of a strategy. Say to yourself: 'Some of my work is boring and my boss is weird, but I must do the work and be polite to her.'" Readjusting your expectations sets you up for less disappointment. It could also make your job objectively better: A buttered-up boss may grant you more opportunities in the long run.

When Leahy was at his first academic post, his girlfriend wearily pointed out that he was complaining constantly. Leahy couldn't deny the charge. He began to record his grievances in detail. He then reviewed the diary and asked himself, "Is complaining about this helping me?" The answer was invariably no. He instead started asking himself, "Is there productive action I could be taking to address this concern?" Repeatedly wrestling with his complaints and taking initiative won him a fulfilling visiting professorship in British Columbia.

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2 Overcome Your Fear of Failure

YOU COULD QUIT your banking job and open an antiques shop or move to Romania to live with your online love. But what if it doesn't work out? What will everyone say about you then? The fear of public humiliation can keep us safe, if not content. Simply ask, "What is the likelihood that the thing I fear will come true?" says Lubetkin. And then, "If it does come true, will it really be as bad as I think?" Our minds tend to cue the worst-case scenario, what psychologists call "awfulizing." But

even shaky startups and broken hearts can be remedied.

Those who would judge you may not even notice your missteps. If they do, they would be smart to think your behaviors—and not you as a human being—are what failed. Temporary slips are crucial to eventual success, Leahy says. "When I was an undergraduate, a classmate of mine got a C on a paper in his economics course about an idea for an overnight mail service. Two years after college, he took that blueprint and started FedEx."

The pressure to stay within others' perceptions of you could pen you in more than the fear of failure per se. Say you're tired of being the shy one and are ready to reach out. But you've always called yourself bashful and all of your friends and family members treat you accordingly. "It creates a rigidity that keeps you from moving forward," says Nando Pelusi, a clinical psychologist based in New York City. If you act in a new way, after all, you may seem phony. But Pelusi would call that progress: What seems inauthentic at first could inch you closer to your true self.

Not everyone will immediately take to the new you, warns psychologist Judith Sills. But such killjoys are probably responding to their needs rather than yours—the friend who skips your going-away party may be reveling in her sadness at losing your companionship. But ultimately, says Leahy, "If people close to you don't like you now that you're happier, then you have to ask yourself if they're good people to have in your life."

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3 Embrace Risk and Novelty

EVEN IF NO one is watching you, lighting out for new, unmarked territories is terrifying. We overestimate dangers and risks, Lubetkin says, because oftentimes our parents—especially if they are overprotective—teach us that danger is to be avoided at all costs.

Pelusi sees a distal cause for skittishness in the face of change. "We impute a lot of power to the unknown, because it was life-threatening for much of human history," he says. "Putting that fear in its proper perspective can help. You are probably not going to fall down a ravine or get eaten by a lion if you move to the opposite coast."

At the same time, points out Pelusi, the human spirit wants to break out of habitual constraints. Studies confirm what many an entrepreneur or divorcée will tell you: We tend to regret the things we didn't try more than those we did—even when we fail.

“If you don’t have a series of things you’ve walked away from, you’re probably not leading a rich life.”

Analyzing risk in the classic “Should I stay or should I go?” scenario can bring on headaches or even paralysis. Lubetkin recommends that you write down the pros and cons of each situation and then weight them numerically, according to how important they are to you. But then you must also factor in the more subjective “gut” feelings. Flip a coin in order to hypothetically decide your fate, then take note of how you react to the outcome.

A skewed perspective can tip the scales, though. “If you stay in a bad situation, it generally makes you feel worse about yourself—which makes you feel more pessimistic,” says Leahy. If you’re contemplating a breakup, the painful costs will largely be upfront. As with an exercise regimen, it will hurt at first but get easier over time.

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4

Create a New Internal Vision

MASTER THE “ART of possibility,” says Sills, author of *The Comfort Trap*, by projecting a new you on the big screen of your mind’s eye. “There are two poles related to change,” Sills says. “One pole is being unsatisfied and uncomfortable where you are. The other is a compelling vision.” If you’re so miserable you’re crawling out of your skin, you may not need a fantasy to push you out the door. Most of us are in situations that may not be great, but are nevertheless stable—which means we need something to run toward, not just an excuse to run away.

The first step to conjuring this vision, says Sills, is to tune into your discontent rather than numb it: “After two bags of Doritos, some TV shows, and maybe even a scotch, you don’t remember how bad the job is, and soon you’re overweight and you think that’s the source of your unhappiness.”

Once you’ve figured out why you’re unhappy, try to trace any hint of interest or passion that flutters up during the day. Think back: “As a child, how did I envision myself as an adult?” If you can’t pull a dream scenario out of your head, ask, “Which of my friends’ lives would I most like to live?” And “If I had to stay in this job or relationship, what would I want to change about it and what would I want to keep?”

The image may prime you to act, but taking the first steps will still be difficult. It’s easy to tell your mother, “Can you believe he got drunk on my birthday?” But it’s hard to say to him, “We’re done. Don’t ever call me again.” Make it easier by thinking through the small consequences first. For instance, you can rehearse what you’ll say to your friends

when you ask them to set you up on dates.

Once you start realizing your fantasy, keep altering it to match reality. Otherwise, the vision could remain dangerously intangible. If your mind has a clichéd montage of the rock star’s life on a loop, it can’t effectively measure incremental progress in your guitar career.

Prepare yourself by imagining scenes full of misgivings, too. “In the last two weeks of your job,” says Sills, “all of a sudden you’ll fall in love with all of those coworkers who annoyed you.” Change equals loss, but if you don’t have a series of things you’ve walked away from, adds Lubetkin, you’re probably not leading a rich life.

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Expect (and Enjoy) Discomfort

IF YOU WANT to whip yourself into shape or renovate your apartment, don’t wait until you feel ready, says Leahy, because no such time will come. Instead, commit to doing something that you don’t want to do each day. After all, if your goal is to lose 15 pounds, you’ll have to consistently deny your desires in order to achieve it. Resourceful people, Leahy says, are not having fun all of the time. But they do feel empowered when they force themselves to do what’s needed.

Such self-directed whizzes also reward themselves for maintaining the habit of tackling dreaded tasks, not just for the results. They embrace “constructive discomfort,” Leahy says. When you feel hungry and antsy because you can’t have that piece of cheesecake, remind yourself that those are victory signals. “It’s like when ballet dancers say a workout was good because it hurt good.”

The athlete’s body and an artist’s masterpiece are a long time coming. But you can mentally divide the time you are investing in your plan. “Think of the salesman who is selling something that costs one-thousand dollars,” says Lubetkin. “If he meets with ten people before he sells it, each of those meetings is still worth one-hundred dollars—the paycheck is just delayed.” You can break your abstract idea of “being healthy” into the concrete daily choices—such as reaching for an apple instead of a Snickers—that will eventually make you so.

If you don’t hang in there and wait for the payoffs, after all, no one else will. “This is the only life you’ll ever have,” says Pelusi. “The universe is indifferent and even people who love us only love us with sobering intermittency. So look within and choose to direct yourself.” **PT**