

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

When Old Dogs Can't Learn New Tricks

I wouldn't have dedicated my life to helping people change if I didn't deeply believe that change is possible. And I have seen people make incredible turn-arounds when I least expected it. But I need to be straight with you: Some people were either born with or developed traits that make it extremely unlikely that they will ever change. Short of a frontal lobotomy or divine intervention, some dogs are just not going to learn new tricks.

I feel compelled to be the bearer of this bad news today and flesh out some themes of my last newsletter, because of the agony I keep seeing in those who love these “unchangeables” and who keep holding on, white-knuckled, to the hope that they will change, only to be bitterly disappointed time after time.

I tell you, the Cirque du Soleil contortionists have nothing on Lovers of Unchangeables. These folks put themselves through no end of effort in an attempt to get Unchangeables to change. They'll diet, take classes, learn new hobbies, or have sex when they don't want to in an effort to please the person; they'll confront the person, host umpteen interventions, go to years of therapy, and explain away endless breaches of trust; they'll give money they can't afford, answer calls at all hours, and conceal painful things the person has done from themselves and others; they'll neglect other relationships, sacrifice their own health, and turn to their own addictions to cope with all the effort they are exerting. There's no end to what they'll try. And sacrificing one's self through repeated attempts to get an Unchangeable to change is simply a horrible way to live.

But what if there was a way to tell the difference between old dogs who *can* learn new tricks—even if slowly and not too many at a time—and old dogs whose tombstones will read, “Never, ever, ever changed no matter what anyone tried”? If so, it might be possible for Lovers of Unchangeables to mourn the fact that the person will never change and then figure out what they themselves would need to do to live healthy, joyful lives themselves in ways that do not at all depend on the Unchangeable changing. They could be confident in their choice to shift their strategy with the Unchangeable from useless attempts to get them to change to setting limits on the amount they will let that person affect their own self worth, time, money, relationships, career, future plans, etc.

How to Spot an Unchangeable

I'm not claiming to have the final word on what traits absolutely prevent people from changing without exception. But these are the ones I've read about and seen in my own relationships and my work with adults. (These may not apply to folks younger than about 25, whose resistance to change may be a matter of brain development more than personality trait problems.) I've listed them in rank order, with the first ones being those that are most likely to prevent change:

1. **Total Failure to Take Responsibility for Anything.** Whenever the person is confronted with a shortcoming, breach of trust, or anything negative, they find a way to blame it on something else—their childhood, another person, you, their circumstances, etc. Or they

rationalize it away until the behavior is not bad (e.g., “I don’t drink *that* much,” “You are just too sensitive,” “It’s not personal, it’s business,” “I just do what I need to do to get the job done”). They can’t stand to admit even partial fault. It’s like they’ve got a Teflon shield for negativity that insures nothing negative can touch their consciousness. Because they can’t allow themselves to perceive that anything about them is negative, there is no internal motivation to change it. The invitation to change gets knocked down before it can ever take root.

2. **Not Understanding the Difference between Talk and Change.** Some people, when confronted, will admit to being at fault. They will show remorse that looks real and convincing. But no matter how many times they are confronted about the same issue, no matter how much the consequences for their behavior escalate, no change results. It is as if they believe that having a conversation about a hurtful behavior is the same as doing something about it. If 10 conversations that include clear, specific behavior change requests, promises, and increasing consequences haven’t led to any behavior change, what are the odds that the 11th conversation will change anything?
3. **A Trail of Wrecked Relationships and Opportunities.** All of us make mistakes in relationships, jobs, school, and other choices. What sets Unchangeables apart is that it seems like they keep making *exactly* the same mistakes over and over again, though they may be able to tell you a different reason for each one. If someone is telling you about (or you learn about from other sources) a long history (5+) of romantic relationships or friendships that ended for similar reasons, helpers they tried and left without really giving it a shot, jobs they were fired from or quit without really trying to make them work, then you would need to see some pretty clear and long term (more than a year) evidence that the person has made a successful break from that past way of being in order to substantiate hope that the person really is different now and is really capable of sustaining a changed direction.
4. **Failure to Change Started Young and Stayed Around.** Traits that started in the teens or early twenties and then kept going after about age 25 are likely to be much less changeable than those that either peaked in the teens and early twenties and then declined as the person matured past 25-30, or those that appeared after 25-30. The longer a trait has been with someone, especially if it spans more than one season of life (adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, late adulthood), the less likely that it will change.

What to Do If You Suspect Someone You Love is an Unchangeable

So let’s say you think you’ve got an Unchangeable on your hands. What now?

1. **Make Sure You’ve Communicated Clearly.** While I’ve described the dangers of hoping an Unchangeable will change when they won’t, it’s also wise to make sure that someone is pretty darned Unchangeable before giving up on efforts to help them. So it’s best to start by asking yourself whether you have ever clearly communicated to the person what you would like them to change in specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-defined (SMART) ways; the effect that their not-changing has on you and others; and what steps you will need to take if the change does not happen. If you have not been able to communicate these things to them clearly, start by doing that once or a few times to see if clarity and repetition has an effect.

2. **Mourn What You Have Lost.** If you have already tried everything you can imagine to get someone to change and you have growing certainty that it's just not going to happen, take some time daily or weekly over several weeks to really think through everything you had hoped could happen, followed by the anger and sadness you feel because of the helplessness of the situation and the hurt that the person has caused you. If you can, share these disappointed hopes and your anger and sadness with another person who can support and comfort you in your loss.
3. **Set New Habits and Limits.** Take some time to think about what a healthy, joyful life could look like for you if you had an absolute guarantee that nothing about the person would ever, ever change. What time, space, emotional, physical, sexual, communication, social, legal, etc. limits would you need to set on the person to ensure that you would be able to make sure your own needs get taken care of? Who else in your life could you go to for help meeting the needs and hopes that you had expected that person to satisfy? What new practices, hobbies, support networks, or schedules could you begin (or stop!) to make sure that your needs get met? What organizations or other relationships could you invest in, where you would get to see positive change happening effectively in the world?
4. **Don't Forget!** Write out the evidence that you have seen that this person will not change. Add some phrases that help you to focus on what you plan to do to increase your own health and joy, despite the fact that the person won't change, like the Serenity Prayer (<http://www.thevoiceforlove.com/serenity-prayer.html>). Review this list daily or weekly to help yourself break the habit of returning to fruitless efforts to get the other person to change.

If you or someone you know would like help with discerning whether someone in your life will change or with changing strategies with an Unchangeable, free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

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