

The Subtle Power of Changing Your Identity

One of the most powerful switches I ever made when changing my entire life was switching up my identity.

And while I never did it overnight, I successfully did it in multiple areas:

- I changed from a smoker to a non-smoker — and once I did, I stopped thinking of smoking as something to do when I was stressed.
- I went from meat-eater to vegetarian (and later to vegan). It literally took meat off the menu for me, so that I didn't even consider eating it.
- I thought of myself as a marathoner. Later, as just someone who exercises regularly to stay fit and healthy. It meant that there was no question I was going to exercise, even if I fell out of it for a bit because of disruptions.
- I became a meditator (and later Zen student). That means even if I stop meditating for a little bit, I'll always come back to it.
- I became a writer. Sure, before this change, I did write, but not daily (join my Create Daily Challenge in Sea Change if you want to change this one!).
- I became a minimalist. Actually, before I decided to call myself that, there wasn't really anyone else who called themselves "minimalists". The purposeful change in identity allowed me to free myself of clutter and enjoy a life of less.

There are dozens of other examples: as a father, unschooling parent, early riser, reader, teacher, speaker, entrepreneur, someone who takes meticulous care of his finances ... every time I've made a major (or minor) life change that stuck, I changed my identity.

It's more powerful than most people realize, and it's doable.

The Subtle Benefits of Changing Your Identity

While it takes a little work, if you can shift how you see yourself ... you'll likely notice some of these benefits that aren't obvious to most people:

- You'll stop doing (some of) the behaviors that you used to do. Stop smoking, stop eating meat, stop playing video games, whatever someone with your identity wouldn't do.
- You'll make the behaviors you want become a given. If you're a writer, you write every day. No questions asked. If you're an entrepreneur, you ... entrepreneur every day? You know what I mean.
- Things that you have to debate yourself about ... become not a question. This saves you a lot of mental energy. It becomes much less of a daily struggle.

- You can change some long-standing beliefs about yourself. That you can't do this, that you're no good at this, that you aren't someone who does this. If they're not serving you, toss em!
- You begin to get a mindset that you can change anything. That you're not stuck in old ways, but someone who can grow and become new possibility.

There are more benefits, but I'm going to let you discover them on your own. By now, it's probably best to get to the How.

How to Change Your Identity

Unfortunately, it's not as easy as flipping a switch and bam presto! You're a new person. However, it's eminently doable.

It can be done a million different ways, but here are some points I've found important:

- **Do it consciously.** We can change our identity without doing it intentionally ... but I've found that it works much better if you do it intentionally. Doing it accidentally is like blindly stumbling upon something amazing — I wouldn't count on it, but if you wander around long enough, it'll probably happen. Instead, make it an intention to consciously shift your identity in this area.
- **Think about who you want to be.** Do you want to be a person who writes every morning? A person who only eats plant-based foods? Someone who buys very little? Write it down: "I am a morning meditator."
- **Intentionally start doing the actions.** Set up visual reminders, phone reminders, whatever you need to do ... but start doing the things that you would do if you're this new version of yourself. If you're a runner, go run.
- **BE the new version of you.** Doing the actions is one thing, but you might be doing it while thinking that this is *so not you*. Instead, do the actions as if you were already that person. See yourself as the runner, the early riser, the vegan. Feel it in your being. Stand as this person.
- **Reinforce it by appreciating yourself.** Each day, have a minute where you look back and see what you did. And appreciate this about yourself. See that you're already shifting. "Yeah, this is happening, good job me!" We tend to focus on the bumps in the road rather than the progress we're making.
- **When you falter, think about what this new version of you would do.** Notice I said "when you falter," not "IF." Even a Zen teacher misses a day of meditation sometimes. That's a part of life. We don't always do things "perfectly" ... but a Zen teacher wouldn't miss a day of meditation and then just give up. She'd just sit the next day. A runner will get back into it even after a week of disruption (maybe due to visitors, illness, travel, injury, etc.). Don't think of the disruption as proof that you're not a runner, but instead approach the disruption as if you are a runner.

Again, there are many other things you can do. As your new identity, you'll think of them! The How actually works itself out once you start to Be the new identity.

A Caveat: Don't Fix Your Identity & Become Rigid

It's important to note that creating a new identity for yourself — seeing yourself in a new way — can also have some pitfalls. A big one is that you might create a fixed, rigid view of yourself.

For example, if you create a new identity of yourself that you're an early riser, that could come with the rigidity that you'll never stay up late or sleep in a little. And if your family has a gathering that's later in the evening, you might just pass — not because it will impact anything important, but because of a rigid view of yourself.

There are lots of other possible examples: if I always work hard, then I can't take a rest; if I am an expert in my field, then I can't ever admit I'm wrong.

We don't want our view of ourselves to limit us always. Some limits are helpful, if they're chosen consciously (i.e. a limit of no meat means I don't harm animals). Other limits can be unhelpful, if they don't let us do what would be beneficial in a situation.

So while shifting identity can be helpful, I encourage you to not be too rigid. Think of your identity as fluid, something you can shift as needed, consciously.

Next Steps

I encourage you to pick one area at a time. Don't try to shift everything about yourself. Choose one, and apply the steps above.

I am compassionate about myself.

I write every day.

I am a loving parent.

What would you like to try on?