



Reach Within Yourself for Motivation and Change

By Stephanie Colo Manning

"Musicians say the hardest part of practicing is taking the instrument out of the case. To begin is to be half done"

—Joey Reiman

How do you find motivation for dietary (or any other) change? Breaking comfortable patterns is difficult, so if you're struggling, you're not alone. I've recently begun studying frameworks for behavior change. I'm certainly no psychotherapist, but I hope these practical thoughts can help you overcome the hurdles of change.

Motivation = Readiness for Change

Whether it happens in a flash or a slow steady journey, it takes something deep down inside us to become ready for meaningful, long-term change.

Sometimes a heart-changing situation can sweep us away with a type of spiritual motivation: a new diagnosis, feeling sick and tired of feeling sick and tired, or a vow to do everything you can to support a family member. For me, my progressing health issues were really scary.

More often, building motivation requires more work. A close friend once told me, "Steph, it was easier for you; you *had* to change," and I know she's right. I see her working hard at trying to stay motivated, but she continues to struggle and I continue to encourage her.

While others can influence motivation, nobody's going to *convince* anybody to change. Any *decisions* to change must always come from within. So how do we evoke our own natural motivations – our own readiness for change? It begins with some soul-searching. Ready to begin?

Five Stages of Readiness

One behavior change theory defines five stages of readiness for change. Which stage of readiness are you in, and how can you shift forward?

Stage 1: Pre-contemplation – Not ready

If you're not ready, you're not ready; how you're living might be working for you. If at some point in the future you feel differently, you can ask yourself how life might be different for

you if you did make a change or what you believe might happen if you don't make a change. You can continue educating yourself, seek inspiration from others, or just dabble with some changes.

Stage 2: Contemplation – Thinking about it

If you feel somewhat ready, like a part of you believes you should make some changes, but a part of you doesn't want to, then reach deep within yourself to identify the core issues in your struggle.

The first step is to find your motivators. To dig for the clear, personal reasons behind what's truly important to you, start by ranking your *values, beliefs, or concerns*, and then list specific reasons for each. Here's my list from 2012:

Important to Me

- *Health and Aging:* I needed to get my autoimmune and Lyme diseases under control, I wanted to wean off my medications and I wanted to look good in photos.
- *Family, Friends and Community:* I wanted to keep my family healthy, help my kids develop lifelong healthy habits and help others.

- *Happiness:* I wanted more energy to feel productive, stay on top of things and laugh more.

Not Important to Me

- *Spotless home:* I knew cooking would be more important.
- *Meaningless obligations:* I knew time was too precious.
- *Over-indulging my kids:* I wanted them to learn self-sufficiency.

When I discovered that my lifelong dietary habits were making me ill and undermining what was truly important to me, my old behavior became less appealing to me. These are still my motivators today.

After you've made your own list, think about how it aligns with your own present behavior. Are your current habits working for or against what's really, truly important to you?

Herein lies your motivation; anchor these into your mind.

The second step is to explore and resolve your ambivalence: You probably have good reasons for and against change, and both arguments can be strong. To move forward, put all your ambivalent thoughts out on the table, honestly examining the pros and cons.

When I first considered changing my diet, I wasn't excited about giving up favorite foods or impacting my social life, I was concerned about finding more time to cook, I was overwhelmed and stressed, and I wasn't completely certain about the benefits. On the other hand, I was really worried about what my old diet was doing to my health, I disliked the weight I was gaining, and I wanted a better future.

Explore your own ambivalent thoughts and think about where this leaves you. Do your reasons for change outweigh your reasons against? What's causing you more distress: *changing* or *not changing*? Your decision to transition to the next stage will depend on your ability to shift this balance.

To support this balance shift, identify your strengths. Tap into these inner resources when challenges arise – they won't let you down:

- *Are you:* Organized? Disciplined? Energetic? Creative? Open-minded?
- *Do you:* Enjoy new flavors? Manage time well? Have supportive friends/family? Have strong faith?
- *Have you:* Ever succeeded at similar changes? Met others who have?

With your strengths in mind, brainstorm some possible small actions you can take, giving them a chance before discounting them. Remember that learned behaviors can be unlearned, consider what's worked for you in the past, and always ask for help. I realized I could learn some new skills to make new favorite foods, I could re-balance my time, read books to learn more, and ask my family for support.

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After weighing several ideas, decide for yourself which options you are (and are not) willing to tackle. What do you need to say no to in your life in order to say yes to these options? Only you know what will work in your life, so if a certain option doesn't fit into your life, then take it off the table for now. Perhaps you'll eat more vegetables, but you won't give up ice cream, so you choose one with fewer ingredients and eat it only on "cheat days."

The third step is to adjust thinking patterns: We can change the way we think, and this changes our behavior and how we look at things. Rather than getting caught up in unrealistic or irrational thinking errors, we can interrupt harmful thinking and change what we're telling ourselves.

- *First, spot the thinking:* "I hate that I can't order pasta, I can't even go out to eat anymore."
- *Then, identify a truer, more useful view:* "Pasta is not the only reason I go out with my friends. Spaghetti squash isn't a bad substitute."
- *Next, trade being the victim for positive thinking:* "I'm not going to complain about my food limitations; there are so many great things I can eat."
- *Finally, find a new story that fits the facts and resonates:* "I'm already feeling better, my energy has improved, and I'm enjoying the food more than I thought."

Instead of focusing on self-pity and obstacles, we can choose to focus on resources, optimism, goal setting, or helping others. When we hear ourselves saying positive words and making arguments for change, we begin to believe these words and it increases commitment. On the other hand, if we're giving arguments for not changing, we're actually building a commitment to *not* change.

Stage 3: Preparation – Making concrete plans

If you feel like the advantages of change outweigh the disadvantages, or if you're already discussing or taking gradual steps toward change, then it's time to set a goal (see *SMART Goal Setting* at <http://www.colokitchen.com/3-SMARTGoals.pdf>).

Willpower will not be enough to attain your goal, so you'll need to prepare and mentally rehearse real strategies. This thinking will keep you going throughout the Action stage and also help you avoid relapse.

- *Anticipate obstacles:* My head was in the game, but I knew external factors would

interfere. So I made hard-boiled eggs for busy mornings, I never left the house hungry, and I packed a cooler for tournaments and air travel.

- *Eliminate your triggers:* I purged the pantry, avoided certain restaurants, declined the breadbasket, and stopped buying junk food for guests.
- *Create desirable cues:* I stocked tons of leftovers, filled fruit bowls, prepared salads ahead, and carried cashews in my purse.
- *Plan alternate behaviors to fill the voids:* I drank sparkling water from a wine glass, replaced Doritos with unsweetened banana chips, ate before social events, and met friends for shopping instead of lunch.
- *Ensure you have everything you need:* I bought spices, ingredients, and some new kitchen tools.
- *Publicize your intentions:* I told whoever would listen.
- *Ask others for help:* I asked my family for help with kitchen clean up.

Stage 4: Action – Diving in

Action: As you begin implementing your new goals, keep a daily *Food Journal* for conscious decision-making and goal tracking (<http://www.colokitchen.com/0-CK-FoodJrnl.pdf>). Recruiting a "buddy" to join you can really help, but your success must depend on your own actions, not another person's involvement. Praise and reward yourself often.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

–Aristotle

Slips and Relapses: Progress is not always a straight path; slips are a normal part of change. We don't learn new behaviors by performing perfectly all the time.

If you handle a slip effectively, you can avoid a complete relapse. Figure out what caused the slip, identify a way around it for next time, and mentally reconstruct the scenario with a better ending. You are resilient. If you find yourself thinking, "I can't help it, I have no self-control"; "This isn't working, I give up"; or "I'll never be able to change," then spot the irrational thinking error and trade it for: "I'm learning how to handle these situations. Today I had trouble because (blank) and next time I will (blank)."

Relapse is common within the first three to six months. Your ambivalence, obstacles, and triggers may resurface now – have solutions ready. Also watch for:

- *Family/Social Pressures:* The people closest to you can negatively influence you, as they feel affected by your new behavior. Involve them, explain your reasons for change, and request their support. Find a support buddy, join classes, or organize a support group.
- *Stress:* We often associate food with nurturing. Keep a Stress Journal to identify your triggers, your reactions, and your resulting eating behavior (<http://www.colokitchen.com/5-CK-StressJrnl.pdf>). You can then work on reducing these triggers, invoking relaxation techniques, or changing the way you think about a situation.
- *Anger, Anxiety, Depression, Boredom, Fatigue, Arguments, Urges, Cravings, Mindless Eating:* These can trigger old habits. Eat consciously, savor the taste, eat only at the table, and leave food on the plate. Strategize in advance – what will work for you?

Stage 5: Maintenance – Six months in

Preventing relapse continues to be the key. If a relapse does occur, get yourself back on track without self-judgment or guilt. Expand your support circle to include those who already practice these behaviors.

Remember the acronym "MATS" as your framework for lasting behavior change: find your Motivators, explore and resolve Ambivalence, adjust Thinking patterns, and form Strategies to support your goals. Take pride in your accomplishments, identify your next goal, and be an inspiration to others.

To Begin is to be Half Done

So—what's your readiness for change? Are you ready to reach within yourself to evoke your own natural motivations, transition through the stages, and do what's truly important to you? Begin and you'll be half done.

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