

What can I change, if I am in a difficult situation or have to deal with difficult people?

*Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose a response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom. -- Viktor Frankl*

Clients come to me because they are facing some kind of challenge in their life. Sometimes they think that the solution lies in changing the situation, or changing something in a person who is „creating“ a difficult situation. And sometimes they realize that the solution lies in changing something in themselves.

As for changing the situation -- you can change jobs, partners, friends or where you live. But even if you manage to find the perfect job, or the perfect partner, or perfect friends, or perfect country or city -- nothing will stay perfect. Everything will change. The perfect partner will probably at some point become the very imperfect partner, in whom you only see flaws. The same is true with job, friends, or country where you live.

That doesn't mean that it isn't a good idea to change your situation. It may be a really good idea and will probably have an impact on you, but it might not be the impact you wanted. Or it might not have any impact at all.

As for changing another person: I have certainly tried to get other people to be exactly as I want them to be, but in hindsight, I now see that it was a waste of my time and energy. I invested a lot and didn't get much in the way of results. I could have tried to accept them as they are (which can also take a lot of time and energy!) And in any case, they have the right to act, think, and feel the way they want to, whether I like it or not.

I have come to the conclusion that it makes more sense to focus on changing something in myself. If I do that, I have a greater chance of being successful, because I am the one who is in control of the process of change. I get to decide what to change, and I can choose the path I want to take to reach my goal. I can even stop the process at any point, and decide that I want to take a break, or take a different path, or focus on a different goal, or simply decide

that I have reached my goal and celebrate what I have achieved. All of those decisions are in my control.

Using two examples from clients, I will describe some changes that people have made in themselves. Then using some example from my own life, I will explain three dimensions where you can make a change in yourself.

Jerry

One of the issues that Jerry wanted to explore with me was a conflict between him and his wife. They had different approaches to raising their son. Sometimes she got angry with Jerry for doing things, or not doing things, her way.

Although he was angry with her, too, he focused on changing his behavior instead of trying to get her to see things his way. For example, instead of arguing with her, or defending his way of parenting, he took some deep breaths as a way to calm himself, and then asked her some questions, in an attempt to better understand her anger. The conflict did not escalate, and he described feeling more confident in accepting her anger.

Listening to her anger did not lessen his anger towards her, but he decided to keep this feeling to himself. "I think it is better for me to hear her anger, and try to understand and accept it, rather than telling her about mine. At some point, I want to tell her about my anger, but not now. I don't think she can hear it. And I don't feel seen by her right now."

He described a growing tension between them – they had stopped having fun together, and there wasn't much intimacy. So, he told me how he planned to ask her out for lunch, tell some jokes, and then when they got back home, offer to rub her feet. "I want to see if I can be silly with her and play with her toes."

The next time I saw Jerry, he told me, "There was a very intimate moment yesterday. She told me, 'I'm feeling scared about us.' And I replied, 'me, too.' And then we cried together. I felt very close to her, something even stronger than physical intimacy."

When I met with Jerry a few weeks later, he told me how he was continuing to change his behavior with her. As he did that, he also began to notice and

accept his feelings, and then to decide which feelings to share with her (for example, fear) and which feelings not to share (for example, anger). He told me that he was learning not take her criticism personally. Instead, he understood her criticism as a reflection of her different way of parenting and an expression (albeit indirect) of her fear that Jerry was doing something wrong that might be detrimental for their son's development.

Near the end of this session, Jerry looked at me and said, "I love our son. I feel a deep connection to him." Jerry was quiet for a moment or two, as if there were no words to describe the love he feels towards his son. Then I asked him if he made any connection between his experience as a father and his experience as a child. "My father died when I was three years old. I didn't get seen by him. I don't feel like I was loved by him." Tears came to Jerry's eyes.

After a moment of silence, Jerry began talking again. "My son is helping me in this conflict with my wife. My wife doesn't mean to, but her reaction to me sometimes makes me think that I am a bad father. But I am a good father. Of course, I make mistakes, but I see my son for who he is. I spend time with him, I pay attention to his needs. I am trying to give him what I didn't get from my father."

Marie

As we started working together, Marie told me that she has always had a sense that she needed to be strong and take care of others. When she was a child, and it was apparent that her younger sister might need extra attention because of a disability, Marie's mother told her, "You have to help me take care of your sister." Marie came to believe that she would not be able to enjoy life, because she needed to take care of her sister and her mother, who was overwhelmed in caring for Marie's sister.

Not only did Marie resent her mother, but she also eventually blamed friends for her unhappiness, as if her friends were causing her to be unhappy. She was not getting her needs met, although she seldom articulated what she wanted. She tended to complain about how others got what they wanted and were happy, and she could not get what she wanted. In effect, she believed that she was not entitled to feel happy. And so why would she invest her time and energy to figure out what she could do to feel happy?

After meeting with Marie for 3 years, I suggested that she could change her beliefs about being responsible for her sister and not being allowed to enjoy life. Shortly thereafter, she said in one of our meetings, “I am no longer responsible for my sister. It was my mother’s idea that I should be responsible. It was not my idea. And now I realize that I am responsible for getting my needs met, and I have the right to enjoy life.”

Over the next few months, I noticed that Marie had begun to change some behaviors, too. Instead of talking about how friends seemed happier than she was, and got what they wanted, she explored with me what she could do to get her needs met and feel happy. Over time, she described finding new friends, and telling them directly what she wanted and didn’t want in her friendships with them, instead of passively waiting for them to suggest what they wanted, and then simply going along.

As Marie continued taking action to get her needs met, she began to notice feelings that she previously wasn’t aware of, or hadn’t felt very often. She described how she was feeling increasingly calm, joyful, and confident in situations where she used to feel angry, sad, or scared.

Three Dimensions of Change

When I think about Jerry and Marie, I conceptualize the changes they made in terms of three dimensions: **behaviors, thoughts, and feelings**.

Behaviors are observable human actions, including what you say, the tone in your voice, gestures, and movements of your body. Behaviors also include how you talk about an experience: do you use dramatic language with metaphors (“he broke my heart”)? Or do you describe the situation as it actually happened (“he told me that he no longer loved me.”)? Do you talk about what you assume other people are thinking and feeling, or do you talk about your thoughts and feelings? Do you talk quickly, as if you have limited time to speak before others stop being interested, or do you take time to listen to your thoughts and feelings, and then speak slowly?

Changing one of your behaviors means a conscious decision to change something you are doing. For example, when I was first learning German, I would often start off a conversation with the statement, “My German is bad.”

After a couple of years, I realized a couple of things -- I was being unfair to myself – who says that my German was good or bad? – and repeating this sentence reinforced my belief that my German was bad. So, I stopped telling others that my German was bad, and instead told myself, “My German is good enough.” When I made this change, I soon felt more confident and noticed that my German was actually constantly improving. Eventually I believed that my German really was good enough.

Thoughts are hidden, they are occurring in your brain, and the only person who knows your thoughts is you (unless you share your thoughts with someone). Thoughts include information, opinions, perspectives, beliefs, and decisions. All of these aspects of thinking have the quality that you accept them as “true” and “right” without using your lived experience to find out if they really are true or right for you at this point in your life.

Changing your thinking includes getting new information, changing opinions, seeing a new perspective (sometimes called framing), exploring and testing beliefs about yourself, others, and the world, and re-making decisions made earlier in your life. For example, I believed that I could not learn German, because it felt so strenuous, and I wasn’t making progress that I could observe. But at some point I realized that this belief was counterproductive in reaching my goal of being able to communicate in German: by believing I couldn’t learn German, I stopped myself from experimenting with different ways of learning, and from seeing the progress I was making (which is often difficult for the learner to see). I changed my belief to “I can learn German, I simply need to figure how to do this, given my preferred learning style ... which is not to sit in a classroom or do homework. I need contact with people where I am having fun.” I eventually found ways to do that.

In addition, my perspective (framing) needed changing. I thought that learning German meant using the language exactly like native speakers do, with a rich vocabulary and proper accent. But this is probably an impossible goal for someone like me who began learning German at the age of 53. My new perspective became, “I will find a way to use German that makes sense for me.” Years later, a native German speaking friend told me that she had started using “Cooper German”: she used words and phrases, and even “incorrect grammar” that she had heard from me, and incorporated these into her everyday speech. I had developed my own form of German, it was good enough for our conversations, so it was good enough for her.

Like thoughts, **feelings** are hidden sort of. (I'll come back to this). In my experience, feelings arise naturally and spontaneously in your body, as a reaction to a stimulus from outside your body or inside your brain. Feelings appear to be biological in nature and an essential aspect of being human. Sometimes clients tell me that they want to control their feelings, but I am not sure that that is possible, because they are a natural, biological process.

Now here is the "sort of": unlike thoughts, other people will sometimes sense your feelings before you do. That is because feelings are automatically expressed on your face, in your voice, and through your skin. For example, if I am scared, someone who is watching or listening to me, or simply nearby, might well see, hear, or sense the fear in me, even before I am aware of the fear.

Changing your feelings includes the ability to notice feelings that you previously didn't notice, the ability to "name" feelings accurately, and then to consider the various ways that you could express feelings once you have "named" them. And, to some extent, you can stimulate certain feelings you want; for example, many people who do yoga report that they feel more relaxed, joyful, and powerful afterwards.

On my way to German class, I would often notice a "sick to my stomach" sensation. It seemed to be an indication of fear, and I realized I was afraid to go to class, "look stupid" and make mistakes, and worried that the teacher would criticize me. I was already 53 years old, and going to school to learn German reminded me of going to school as a child. I didn't want to feel like a child again!

So, I used various techniques as I sat in class: breathing deeply, keeping my feet on the floor, and relaxing the muscles in my shoulders. When possible, I chose teachers who I already knew, and liked, and who would be gentle with me in their corrections. I allowed myself to stay home and not go to class on days when my stomach hurt too much. I even found a language learning method where the teachers never correct mistakes. (It isn't actually necessary to directly correct mistakes. It may be counter-productive. But that is another story.)

Other people also change

I want to share one last aspect of change. Even though I believe it is a waste of energy to try to get other people to change, the reality is that other people do change, and these changes are sometimes exactly what we want from others. But in my experience, they come as a surprise, you could even say they are a gift.

Years ago, when I was working in the U.S., a colleague, Gene Washington, used to say: „The universe complies with a made-up mind.” Another colleague, Jo Lewis, a psychotherapist, put it this way:

I can't you tell how many times it would appear to be an "accident" that something occurs to impact a client, that neither of us had any power over. For example, a client really needs an opportunity to practice a new behavior and have that rewarded. Sure enough, just when they're ready and feeling empowered enough to step out there, here comes the opportunity they need, and they get to see how they've been internally transformed.

When I was 50, I finally admitted something that I had been too ashamed to admit: that I had hurt people and myself through my impulsive behavior. I realized that I had an addiction.

Around this time, I also got much closer to my mother. For most of life, I didn't believe that she loved me. But as I got older, I realized that she loved me, in her way ... not exactly what I wanted, but it was love. As I began to accept her love for me on her terms, she and I became quite close.

During a visit to the U.S. in 2004, we sat outside on a warm summer evening. She began to ask me some questions, and I realized that she was probably trying to piece together some aspects of my life that I had never talked about (because I was too ashamed). I gave her some of the missing pieces, and then told her about my addiction. I had never thought I would tell my mother that I was an addict!

In our conversation that night, I experienced her acceptance of me, even the shameful parts of me. This acceptance of me, exactly as I am, was an expression of her love for me. At the end of our conversation, she thanked

me several times for trusting her to tell her about my addiction, and wished me well in my recovery.

Three months later, when I was back home in Germany, she called me one evening with news of her cancer diagnosis. I flew back to the U.S. the next day and was with her for the next six weeks until she died. I now think of these last few weeks with her as a gift that we gave each other. We experienced a deep love for each other.

It is because of this experience, and other experiences in my life and the life of clients and friends, that I am absolutely convinced that people change. When a client tells me that her mother will never change, I have an impulse to say, "You don't know that. I have experienced things that I didn't think were possible."

And when a client tells me, "I can't change that in me," I sometimes ask, "Is that true? Or is it rather that you don't know how to change, or you are not ready to change, or you don't want to change, or you don't have enough support to change?"

By the way, if you or I don't want to change something in ourselves, we have the right to say, "I want to stay exactly as I am." But if you or I want to change something in ourselves, I believe it is possible. We may not know how, and it may take time, but I am convinced that we can find a way. Or as my mother used to say, "Where there's a will, there's a way."