

LET GO...

EVERY TIME WE SAY GOODBYE

Why do we hold back from changing situations that aren't working out for us, even when we're miserable? Lorna V discovers why moving on is so hard and how we can learn to love letting go

Two years ago, Juliette* had to face up to being in a rut. She had no job satisfaction due to endless cutbacks by the university where she headed a department, she was fed up with her noisy neighbours disturbing her sleep, and the fact that her partner of a decade didn't see the point of marriage was more than a niggle. When the university started making redundancies, Juliette realised it was time to make changes before they were imposed on her.

She always looked at job vacancies to see what was out there. The only ads that ever appealed were for jobs abroad, but she had a teenage son. 'I went into work one day livid with my sister for telling me the night before that all I did was moan,' she says. 'I was furious she'd said I used my son as an excuse not to move and find another job. Having left his dad, I couldn't uproot him, and what about my partner? Then I got to work and the redundancies were announced. It was like a sign that I had to do something.'

Juliette applied for a job in Australia in her lunch break. 'It just leaped out at me – I was perfect for it, and it was an 18-month project. I didn't think I'd get it. But, weirdly, even just applying made me feel better.'

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Changing any situation that makes us unhappy – a job or career, a fitness regime, a relationship or friendship, a neighbourhood or country – is daunting, if not terrifying. Many of us feel we should intuitively know how to do it, as if understanding how to make changes is innate. The opposite is true. Experts agree letting go of long-standing situations, people, places and things is a skill that requires conscious effort to learn. A certain amount of emotional chaos and uncertainty is natural and not something to beat yourself up about.

Although we may know full well that the time has come to move on, many of us will either put off doing anything about it or at the other extreme, we'll dive right in with gritted teeth to get it over with as fast as possible, like ripping off the proverbial plaster. Why do we do this? Psychologists refer to it as the 'peak-end rule': how we were at the peak and the end of any experience is what

we will remember most. In other words, the way we remember an ending is disproportionate to the experience itself. And we unconsciously know this.

MANAGING YOUR EMOTIONS

Clinical psychologist Dr Cecilia d'Felice recommends consciously setting a goal to work towards a good ending. 'This is important, psychologically. If we move on carrying the guilt and shame of a bad ending, we take those feelings with us into the new situation. Even if these are buried deep in our unconscious, we may find ways to punish ourselves for the bad ending later. So a good ending is vital for our wellbeing,' she explains.

Sometimes, moving on can be a challenge because we tend to cast ourselves in the role of victim or victimiser (the one who leaves the job, or the one who is ousted from it). This can make us feel guilty, or bad somehow, so it's not surprising we find ourselves struggling to make the break. 'This is why finding forgiveness in any situation is important,' explains d'Felice. 'We need to free ourselves from unhelpful victim/victimiser roles and offer a new paradigm.'

Defusing emotion from anything we're trying to change is essential. It's easy to get tangled up in a web of emotions. In Juliette's case, these included fear of being unable to get a new job, fear

*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

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>>> of getting one that would turn out to have the same problems, anger towards her employer for not appreciating her, fear of being unable to afford a move, resentment towards her partner for not wanting marriage, guilt that she might be letting down her son having walked out on his dad, and regret that she'd never had the guts to work abroad before she'd had a child.

The personality type we can learn from is the successful entrepreneur. 'Imagine you are trying to start a new business, and lots of things are going wrong,' says Neal Roese, professor of marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Illinois, and a specialist in the psychology of decision-making.

'The sort of person who is actually good at decisions, and tends not to regret taking action, is the sort of person who is not impulsive, not emotional, and not prone to overthinking. Studies of successful entrepreneurs fit this profile.'

'The essential aspect of successful entrepreneurs is that they, too, experience sharply negative emotions (like regret) after failure. They rant and rage, but get over it quickly and move on to the next task, the next decision. The key is to not get trapped in a cycle of rumination that paralyses new action.'

WHAT'S NEXT?

The scariest part of change is not so much letting go of an unhappy situation, but the uncertainty over what comes next. 'Focusing on what comes after is part of the process,' says d'Felice. 'We wouldn't be leaving one psychological, emotional or physical place if we weren't travelling to something better.' The problem is that when we're lost in a fog of anxiety, it can be hard to see what's next. Some experts believe it makes

whether it's right to move on. We need to open our minds to anything that can help us make the right decision at the right time, says d'Felice: 'This could be words spoken either in person, or through the words of a character in a book, film or song – anything that's relevant to us.'

It can be beneficial to discuss your feelings about leaving a situation with a neutral person who could offer some perspective. Yes, you may feel quite certain at 5pm after the Monday from hell that you need to quit your job and move to Tuscany to run an olive farm. On the other hand, you may just be having a bad day. Keeping a diary can help. If bad days have become the

norm, it's time to take action. And leaving may not be your only option.

Brenda Davies, who has worked as a physician and consultant psychiatrist, is no stranger to changes. Whether guiding corporations, politicians or individuals, she suggests we think in terms of metaphorical hilltops and valleys: we need the hilltop to see how far we've come and where we want to go, and the fertile valley to prepare for the next lift. 'Being willing to leave the top while we're still fine is the art,' she says. 'Not to wait until we tumble, have burnt out, are so stressed that everyone knows we're no longer at our best; to let go and serenely glide into the valley to rest, recover, repair, prepare, then rise like a phoenix to the next thing.'

There is no science to the perfect time and conditions for change. Roese says knowing when to move on is the essential puzzle of risk management. His advice is to consider all the risks involved in any decision for change, then lean towards taking action. 'The trouble with inaction in the face of a bad

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sense to make time to find a new vision. But d'Felice suggests we use this only to 'facilitate movement forward' rather than becoming fixated on the vision.

It's reassuring to learn that the fear of making the 'wrong' decision is also natural. We're wired with this fear, making it all the harder to overcome. D'Felice encourages us to look at change as an opportunity. 'In reality there are no *wrong* decisions because everything we're experiencing is a lesson.'

Surprisingly, the experts agree that intuition is a big factor in knowing

situation is you have the bad situation but you also have your own regret over inaction, and its inevitable offshoot, self-blame. You end up feeling worse because you're stuck in a bad marriage or job or situation even though you *could* have done something about it,' he says. 'From a psychological standpoint, inaction regrets are more pernicious as they tend to haunt us for longer, whereas action regrets tend to be rationalised away and forgotten.'

NEW BEGINNINGS

The late William Bridges, who wrote *Managing Transitions* (Nicholas Brealey Publishing, £14.99), is acknowledged as one of the most influential experts in the field of personal change. He had the idea that transition has three phases – letting go of the past, the 'neutral zone' where the past is gone but the new isn't fully present, and the new beginning itself.

'Most of us struggle after an ending,' says chartered psychologist Sarah Rozenhuler. 'It can feel like a strange, ambiguous time. When you finish something, you have to prepare yourself for time in this neutral zone.'

At this point we tend to confuse guilt with regret when in fact, the two are very different. 'Guilt can be a real blocker in moving on,' explains Rozenhuler. 'But regret is natural, and it's healthy to acknowledge it. The important thing is not to get stuck in fear of regret, which translates as fear of action.'

Often we may have regrets about the part we played in creating an ending. 'Sometimes,' says Davies, 'let's say in the case of a job, we may be aware that we could have done better but for whatever reason, we didn't.' She says we can learn to re-frame how we look back on something and focus on remembering the positives. This helps us to move on.

D'Felice, also author of *21 Days To A New You* (Orion, £7.99), is blunt in saying that seeing blocks and obstacles

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all around us is a way of avoiding change. 'If you can't change your mind about what you think you perceive, then you won't be able to make the changes you desire.' For d'Felice, who herself gave up a high-profile position and left London to live in a seaside town in Italy, peace of mind is a mind free from blocks and bitterness. 'This is the ultimate liberator,' she concludes.

As for Juliette, she was shocked

when she got the job in Australia. Her life not only transformed, but two years on, so has her view of everything she went through. Letting her son live with his father helped heal the pain about the way the marriage ended. Working in Australia got the 'living abroad' dream out of her system. She and her partner agreed that if their relationship survived the distance, they'd marry.

'It was hardly a romantic proposal, but realising my happiness mattered above all else confirmed more than anything how much he loved me,' she says. She returned from her 18-month contract and they are now buying a house.

'It was hell making the decision to take a job I applied for on a whim, but the payoff in every way was huge,' she smiles.

THERE'S SOMETHING I NEED TO TELL YOU...

Your decision to move on from a situation will usually affect someone else too, so developing a few strategies for handling the inevitable tricky discussions ahead are vital. Sarah Rozenhuler offers some crucial advice

Do

- Prepare what to say. But remember you can't control how others react.
- There may be several conversations you need to have, so think through and plan the best sequence.
- If you tend to procrastinate, then enlist an action buddy who will hold your feet to the fire. And if you're impulsive, take time to have these conversations with yourself and prepare what *not* to say.
- Plan your answer to questions that you dread after whatever it is you are changing: 'I'm taking time to decide what's next.' Or 'I'm not ready to talk about this for the moment.'
- Consider professional support – advice from somebody neutral like a personal coach or counsellor who has no vested interest in the changes you make can be hugely empowering.

Don't

- Blame and shame. Keep the focus on yourself and how you feel.
- Burn your bridges on the job front. You may need a reference from your employer in the future.
- Launch into a difficult conversation at an inappropriate moment – like soon after a bereavement or, at the other extreme, while the other person is engrossed in their favourite TV show.
- Ease into the conversation with a rambling preamble. It makes other people anxious.
- Be triggered into shouting or storming out. Identify your triggers in advance and plan how you will handle them if things get difficult, for example leaving the room to get a drink.

See 'Life Changing Conversations' by Sarah Rozenhuler (Watkins, £8.99) for more advice