



Making Changes

Choices That Satisfy; Changes That Last

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Every person who seeks counseling has a unique story to tell, but they all have one thing in common: they want change. But why do some people, despite their earnest desire for something different, end up returning to the same old patterns and experiences while others manage to move in new directions?

Before we look at possible answers to that question, consider these two ideas:

1. In any situation, no matter how forceful it may be, you are capable of choosing how you will respond to it. Your *circumstances* (where you are, what you experience) are distinct from your *self* (who you are, how you act).
2. If you are not content with your life's direction, you can change. To begin, you should realize that satisfying, long-term change is achieved when you are driven by inward passion (intrinsic motivation) rather than outward pressure (extrinsic motivation).

Let me raise the stakes even higher. Consider these claims:

- You can face disappointing circumstances or an uncertain future and still find hope.
- You can feel all the pain of betrayal and still experience compassion.
- You can suffer the deep wounds of angry criticism or accusation and still believe you are more valuable than that.
- You can stand confidently against the strong opinions of others who are telling you what they think you should do.
- You can make a confident decision between conflicting choices even when that choice requires sacrifice.

Do you believe those statements? I do, and I believe they can be true of you. How?

Start by considering this: **The choices you make are primarily determined by whatever desire you feel most deeply.** If you are concerned about making changes, you should consider *what motivates you* to want a certain thing or to move in a particular direction. You need insight into *why* you are compelled to make one choice rather than another.

In many instances, your reason for a choice may be more important than the choice itself. I face this often when a betrayed spouse asks me whether they should stay in their marriage or leave it. I cannot answer that question for them, but I can help them focus on understanding the reasoning behind whatever choice they make. That reason will determine whether or not the choice they make is a healthy one for them.

I may sit with three different clients during a single day, all of whom have decided to stay with a cheating partner, and observe that only one of them seems to be making a healthy choice. My assessment is not based on the condition of the relationship, but on the reason for their decision. Motive makes all the difference.

To determine which choices are good for you, first consider what compels you to make them.

People tend to be moved by three primary desires: Do, Get, or Be. You experience all three motives and each of them plays an important role in the decisions you make. There is not one good motive and two bad ones; they are all necessary. Sometimes they are in sync, pushing you toward a common goal for different reasons. Other times, however, each directs you toward a distinct outcome.

When you feel a tension between choices, the desire that has been most deeply cultivated will be the one that determines your decision. Which one leads you to a healthier change? Can you strengthen the better desire so that it wins out over the others?

Let's start by understanding the difference between each of the three motivating desires.

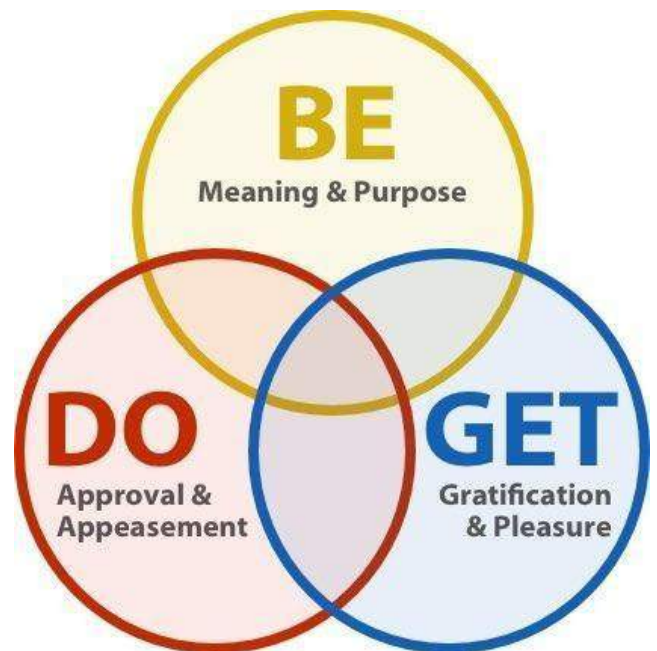
Motivated by the Desire to DO

This desire is driven by the need for approval or appeasement. The source of approval may be parents, family, peers, a partner, church, god, or other outward standards. A doing person's focus is to maximize praise and minimize disapproval.

This is external motivation. The expectation to think, act, or live in a certain way is defined by something or someone outside yourself. You may be compelled by a sense of obligation or duty, or by the fear of consequences if you do not act in an appropriate manner. Failure to meet the standard usually results in feelings of anxiety or shame.

The motive to *do* plays an important role in our lives. If we did not have external standards to follow, society would become chaotic as each person defined their own rules. Thankfully, we do not live that way. I may prefer to drive double the speed limit, but I don't. Even if I would rather have all my groceries for free, I exit through the checkout lane and pay for what I want.

Doing becomes a problem when it is the primary motive in an individual whose inward beliefs and desires are contrary to the outward standard. Because this person lives under constant tension, the long-term outcome tends to be either (1) an eventual rebellion against these expectations, often expressed through dramatic changes in behavior or attitude, or (2) a life lived with joyless acquiescence.



The following expressions are examples of thoughts or actions motivated by *doing*:

- “There has never been a divorce in my family. Mine is not going to be the first marriage to fail.”
- “I do things this way because I’ve been taught to do things this way.”
- “I would have quit this career path long ago but my parents convinced me to keep at it.”
- “If I were to do that, my church would shun me.”
- “She threatened to make my life miserable if I left her.”

Motivated by the Desire to GET

This desire is driven by the need for gratification and pleasure. The person acting out of the desire to get believes satisfaction will be realized by gaining something outside themselves (a fulfilling relationship, a successful career, wealth or possessions, a good reputation, a particular achievement, etc.).

Like *doing*, *getting* is also an external motivation. It pushes you in a pursuit of outward goals, then rewards you with the pleasure of achieving them. Anyone firmly established in this desire will demonstrate great determination and single-mindedness in their efforts to attain what they want. They are often recognized as highly motivated and successful by the measure of Western culture.

For good reason, you are a *getter* in one way or another. You want a happy relationship, a satisfying job, good health, secure finances, enjoyable experiences, and maybe a great cup of coffee on a cold morning—all worth having. However, once the pursuit of these things becomes your primary focus, your contentment can be altered by circumstances out of your control. As long as life cooperates, you remain pleased. When it does not, you become discontent.

What are the chances that something might keep you from the thing you desire? Consider all that is out of your control, despite your best intentions and efforts. Betrayal, injury, a failing economy, accidents, canceled flights, theft, interruptions in a schedule, acts of God, or the person who got there before you—all these, and many more, can instantly ruin your best-laid plans.

More significantly, many people eventually realize that an achieved goal does provide the satisfaction they expected, so a new pursuit begins in search of lasting gratification.

It may seem that wanting to *get* a good marriage is an adequate motive for healing after an affair, but it is not. Why? Because if your partner does not want the same thing, you will become frustrated in your inability to get what you want. Additionally, you will only remain motivated to work on change as long as you feel a certain way. When you stop feeling good (or lose hope for feeling good), you will stop working on change.

The following expressions are examples of thoughts or actions motivated by *getting*:

- “I’m willing to change if it will get him to love me.”
- “If I keep doing this for five more years, we should be financially set for life.”
- “I’m losing my marriage and don’t believe I will ever be truly happy again.”
- “Why should I do any more work? I can see things are not going to turn out the way I want.”
- “I love the recognition I gain by doing all these good things.”

Motivated by the Desire to BE

This desire is driven by the need for meaning and purpose. The person motivated by being has a vision of the kind of person they desire to become (or continue becoming) and finds fulfillment in choices that lead them toward it.

Unlike the other two desires, being is an internal motivation with a primary focus on inward change. A *being* person is motivated from the inside-out and so is less affected by outward obstacles (others' opinions, discouraging circumstances, etc.). Throughout their lifetime, they can steadily move toward their primary goal regardless of shifts in the people or events around them. They demonstrate a level of inner stability and vulnerability that encourages a more intimate connection with others. They tend to report greater satisfaction at the end of life.

Bronnie Ware wrote a best-selling memoir, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying – A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*, in which she chronicled her work with dying patients. For years, she shared the final three to twelve months of life of many people and talked to them about the joys and regrets of life. Consider the five regrets most often expressed and what each teaches us about the value of *doing*, *getting*, or *being*.

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I didn't work so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish I had let myself be happier.

Victor Frankl was a psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor who suffered through unjust conditions and witnessed the dark side of humanity. His wife, mother, and brother all died in concentration camps. He later wrote the book *Man's Search for Meaning* in which he described the life of a camp inmate and observations regarding what gives purpose to life. He wrote: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

The best choices are not those that are made from a focus on the value others place on us (*doing*) or from a reaction to our circumstances (*getting*) but from a clear perspective of who we are and the story we want to tell with our lives (*being*).

The following expressions are examples of thoughts or actions motivated by *being*:

- "The life I thought I would live is no longer a possibility. Things have changed forever, but I still have a good story to tell. Do you want to tell it with me?"
- "I seem to be the only one who thinks this way, but I cannot make the choice others want me to make because it would violate my conscience."
- "I make certain choices at work because being a good wife and mother is more important to me than having the best job."
- "I've put off serious relationships because living out my passion requires so much of my time and energy."

Your Deep Desire

Which of these three motives should move you? All of them! Although *being* is the desire that most consistently drives us toward healthy change, *doing* and *getting* should not be considered undesirable motives. There are times when you should put the desires or expectations of others before your own (*doing*), and seeking pleasure or avoiding pain are universal motivations often necessary for survival (*getting*).

But here's a truth that is important for you to understand: **When your choices are in conflict, the motive that has been consistently cultivated and firmly established will be the one that determines your choice. It is your deep desire** and it will take priority over the other two.

A person with a deep desire is single-minded and willing to sacrifice in the other areas in order to achieve their goal. For example, a person with deep *getting* will sacrifice the approval of others and character values in order to get what they want; a person with deep *doing* will sacrifice things they want or their own passions in order to please others; and a person with deep *being* can stay true to their inner passions/values even when others disapprove or when they are in painful/disappointing circumstances.

Desires In Action: Examples from Affair Recovery

Much of my counseling work is with couples working through affair recovery issues. Consider how the outcome of these common affair scenarios will differ based on a person's deep desire:

Scenario 1: A spouse with a partner involved in an affair.

- A deep desire to DO: For the third time, Jack's wife left him for another man. He has lost all hope of regaining an intimate, trusting relationship but makes his choice based on what he has always been taught—marriage is meant for a lifetime and so you never give up. Jack pushes down his resentment and waits for her to come back again.
- A deep desire to GET: When she finds out about her husband's affair, Cindy becomes frantic. She cannot imagine going through a divorce and being alone. She begins the work of convincing her husband to give up the affair and come back. Cindy compensates for his failure to change by assuming responsibility for putting her marriage back together again.
- A deep desire to BE: Jamie feels the deep pain of her husband's betrayal and hopes their marriage will someday be restored. She tells him this and invites him to join her in the work, but focuses on ways she can move toward healthy change whether or not he accepts her invitation.

Scenario 2: A spouse deciding between their affair and their marriage.

- A deep desire to DO: Even though their marriage had been empty for years, Lydia never intended to cheat on her husband. Falling in love with a co-worker happened so easily that it seemed natural to start an affair. When her husband found out, she ended the affair and returned to her marriage because that is what a good spouse and parent should do. She has little expectation or intention of loving her

husband again but doesn't want to feel the guilt of being the one who broke up their family.

- A deep desire to GET: Mike knows he has hurt his wife and disappointed his children. That is never what he intended and he hopes they will forgive him someday. He knows he could return to his marriage, but believes he will never experience the connection and intimacy he has found with his lover. With only one shot at life, he decides to do what is making him feel happy.
- A deep desire to BE: Justin does not want to lose his marriage, but feels a strong emotional pull toward his affair partner, too. He stopped trying to compare his lists of advantages and disadvantages between the two choices. Instead, he spends time considering what values and qualities are most important in defining who he is and who he is becoming. What story does he want to tell? What life if most consistent with who he was created to be, regardless of his circumstances? From that clarity, he makes his choice.

Ping-Ponging Between *Do* and *Get*

What happens when a person has failed to nurture a deep desire? If the conflict between choices is strong and no particular motive has been sufficiently deepened, a person will likely freeze in indecision or switch choices repeatedly based on whatever desire feels strongest at the moment. This vacillation is most often observed in the constant shifting between *doing* and *getting* desires. Like a ping-pong ball, a person goes back-and-forth-and-back-and-forth between the choices fed by these two motivations, caught in the tension between what they want and what they “should do.”

Spouses who are uncertain about their marriage sometimes attempt to fix their marriage out of a sense of responsibility and obligation (*doing*), but quit trying when the hard work of rebuilding loses to the longing for something or someone better (*getting*). Eventually, when their needs have been satiated or guilt rises again, the double-minded spouse recommits to the marriage (*doing*), and so the cycle continues. Ping-pong.

I have watched capable, smart adults become seemingly powerless in this indecision. Their ping-ponging can go on for years, causing significant damage, until someone finally breaks the pattern by stepping out of it permanently. The better choice is to change focus by first considering *who you will become* (rather than what choice you will make) through this experience.

The Advantage of Being

Being is the desire that can consistently lead you to healthy outcomes. Consider the advantages that *being* has over the other two motives.

- *Being* is the only desire with an internal measure. The success of *doing* is determined by an external standard that may not be consistent with what you truly believe. The success of *getting* is determined by a set of circumstances that are mostly out of your control. Despite your best efforts, the desired outcome may be taken from you or, more likely, will prove to be less satisfying than expected once it is finally attained. *Being* is motivated from the inside-out, not the outside-in, and so you participate more intimately in identifying and pursuing your goals.

- *Being* is the only desire that keeps a person stable even when external experiences shift in a negative direction. Those motivated by *doing* feel guilty, uncertain, or discouraged when opinions turn against them. Those motivated by *getting* become angry, anxious, or depressed when their desired outcome is thwarted by circumstances out of their control. But someone moved by *being* can remain steadfast regardless of shifting opinions or conditions.
- *Being* is the desire that naturally moves a person to a place of authenticity and vulnerability, allowing them to love more genuinely. Strong personal connections can also form within the other circles of desire, but a person's focus in those areas of motivation tends to be on what they *receive* from the relationship rather than on what they *give* to it.
- As a counselor, I observe that *being* is the one desire that consistently leads to life changes that are genuine, satisfying, and lasting.

Deepening Your Desire to *Be*

The exercises listed at the end of this chapter provide specific suggestions for ways to deepen your *being* desire. For many of us, this work is difficult, especially if we have been heavily influenced by *doing* or *getting* in the past. I spent over thirty years of my life heavily entrenched in a doing perspective, making my true opinions and passions subservient to the ways other people wanted me to think and feel. Many of the things that were expected of me were good, but they were not always mine, and that is why I started harboring discontent and resentment.

As I have focused on being, I have found myself returning to many of the same values I once held, but now there is a difference. They have become mine. They are part of a story that I am passionate to tell, a person (husband, father, friend) I desperately want to be. Those standards that remain have settled into a comfortable place inside me. The rest have been let go.

When the desire for *being* begins to deepen in you, you will find yourself tuned into those things that teach you and inspire you toward that kind of change. You will read them in books. You will see them in movies. You will hear them in songs and observe them in art. You will notice them in the lives of others and observe them in people you admire. You will be drawn to the Truth that teaches you what it means to be that person, to tell that story.

Do not fear that kind of change. It is a wonderful thing.