

## Response-ability: do we change our spots?

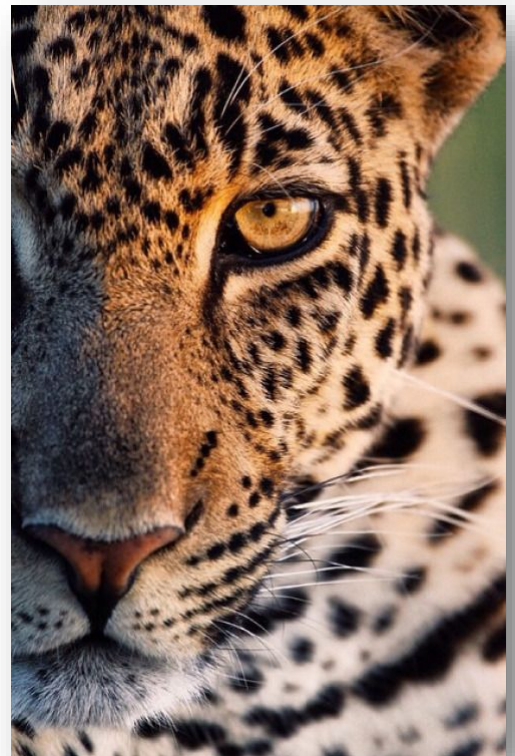
Leopards can't change their spots, but humans sure can. This revelation may simultaneously excite and scare you. With significant change we are liberated from our past and current circumstances, but with it comes toil, moments of failure and sometimes even rejection from those around us as we transform.

### Can we really change?

Twenty-five years ago, when I was studying to become a psychologist, personality was thought to be a stable set of characteristics that didn't change. Some recent research seems to paint a very different reality.

Remember the [Marshmallow](#) test? Walter Mischel would give a small child a marshmallow, telling the young child they could eat it now, or if they could wait for a few minutes, they'd get two marshmallows. Then he left the room. The marshmallows often "mysteriously disappeared." In fairness to the kids, it's akin to asking an adult to have their first coffee at 3 PM! But sometimes Mischel told the child ahead of time that they could just pretend that the marshmallow was not really there. Then the same child waited 15 minutes... The vast majority of children in Mischel's study were able to delay gratification when they reframed their interpretations of the situation. The point of the marshmallow test was to show how flexible people were, but it mistakenly came to represent the idea that there are specific personality traits that are stable and consistent i.e. some people are strong-willed and others are not. This infuriated Mischel: "That iconic story is upside-down wrong. That your future is in a marshmallow. Because it isn't." Mischel declared the idea that our personality traits are consistent as pretty much a mirage.

Sanjay Srivastava, lead researcher and psychologist on a longitudinal study of personality went myth-busting. Over a 40-year period he tracked a very large sample group (132,515 adults, aged 21-60) based on their "Big Five" personality traits (conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness and extraversion). What he and his team found contradicted long-held assumptions about when personalities are set. Conscientiousness, a trait marked by organization and discipline, and linked to success at work and in relationships, was found to increase through the age ranges studied, with the most change occurring in a person's



twenties. Agreeableness, a trait associated with being warm, generous and helpful, bucked the theory that personalities don't change after thirty. On the contrary, people in the study showed the most change in agreeableness during their thirties and continued to improve through to their sixties.

"The levels of change in these two traits seem to model what would make sense with adult roles," Srivastava says. "Conscientiousness grows as people mature and become better at managing their jobs and relationships, and agreeableness changes most in your thirties when you're raising a family and need to be nurturing." Openness showed small declines in both men and women over time, a change that indicates less interest in forming new relationships and may infer greater interest in spending time with a small group of well-known relatives and friends as people age. If you reflect on your own life, go back half a lifetime and how you responded to certain challenges. You probably have experienced an increased maturity and new ways of responding as a result of your capacity to change. If we didn't have this change capacity, we as a species would not have evolved as apex predators given our puny frames (the Rock excluded.)

So, if we can acknowledge that some of our personality can evolve over time, then can we make rapid changes, or will it always occur at glacial speed?

[Prof. Brent Roberts](#) from University of Illinois, a developmental psychologist, analyzed over two hundred studies to see how different types of psychotherapy and pharmaceutical drug treatments impact personality traits for people with mental health issues. Results from their analysis showed that within relatively short periods of time, as little as 2-16 weeks of therapy, personality traits did indeed shift, in positive and lasting ways. This result surprised Prof. Roberts. "It wasn't even within our imagination that personality traits are things that would change over a period of weeks or months," he said. "We're pretty comfortable with the idea that personality traits could develop over the course of years, but not something shorter than that." In addition, the shifts in personality seemed to reflect actual changes in general traits, not just a temporary change in mood, such as the alleviation of depression or anxiety. According to Roberts, these changes are significant because of the way that personality traits like conscientiousness and neuroticism are tied to our relationships, work and health.

We have the capacity to change thanks to certain human endowments: self-awareness regarding our thoughts and emotions; imagination which allows us to solve problems and not be mired in repetitive loops; a conscience to know when to do the right thing; and independent will to activate change. Are these characteristics prevalent in different degrees within us – of course. But that's not the full story...

Prof. Carol Dweck pioneered research in the field of growth mindsets. It is a mindset that one's innate skills, talents, and abilities can be developed and/or improved with determination, while neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to adapt and develop beyond the usual developmental period of childhood. A person with a growth mindset believes that he or she can get smarter, better, or more skilled at something through sustained effort, which is exactly what neuroplasticity tells us. You might say that a growth mindset is simply accepting the idea of neuroplasticity on a broad level!

Neuroscientists have been trying to figure out how neurogenesis (the birth of new neurons) and neuroplasticity (the malleability of neural circuits) work together to reshape how we think, remember, and behave. In 2017 things became a whole lot clearer. During a [state-of-the-art study](#) on mice, neuroscientists at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) found that the combination of neurogenesis and neuroplasticity caused less-fit older neurons to fade into oblivion and die off as the sprightly, young new born neurons took over existing neural circuits by making more robust synaptic connections.

I am not naïvely implying that this process of change is easy, especially for deep-seated personality characteristics. But if we can harness our new insights into how the brain functions, start small and give ourselves enough time to embed these new habits we can significantly increase our chances of sustainable change.

## Should we change?

We all have our own unique quirks and views that make us special. Then there are those characteristics that we need to refine or jettison so that we are better life partners, team players and members of society. Humanities very progress depends on us challenging and growing ourselves.

But are we then being [inauthentic](#)? We have often been let down by duplicitous leaders and influencers, and so authenticity is valued for its rarity. Authenticity builds trust and depth in relationships. However, if we hide behind authenticity as a reason not to grow, we end up limiting ourselves. I get most worried when leaders I work with believe they have arrived and have all the answers... we are after all unfinished works in progress.

Regret free lives are not unequivocally healthy, psychopaths are free of regret/remorse, but you would hardly want to be one! But if we live more consciously, we can choose our path more wisely and appreciate the cost-benefits of some of our potentially regrettable decisions. [Bronnie Ware](#) was a palliative care nurse, who identified 5 regrets themes for those that were literally on their deathbeds, namely: 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 hadn't worked 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." If you reflect on your life currently, which of these would be your primary regrets, and what are you going to do about them?

[Research](#) has shown that generally the biggest regrets we have are not in relation to what we did, but what we did not do. What are you afraid of changing? Do you excessively fear failure and instead sit on the side-lines of life watching others throw their hats into the ring? Do you struggle with Imposter syndrome, never feeling you are good enough and that you will be found out shortly? In effecting proactive change, we may avert: failed relationships, lifestyle health problems, career stalls. WE are that one constant in these situations, and we need to act or be acted upon.

Ultimately it comes down to whether we want to swim in the shallow or deep end of the pool/life. The shallow end is safe, superficial but restrictive. The deep-end is unpredictable and liberating but comes with risk..we need to master our fears.

## How can we change for REAL?

We need to combine self-awareness insights with action that promotes self-actualisation.

### **a) Self-awareness via Post Traumatic Growth (PTG)**

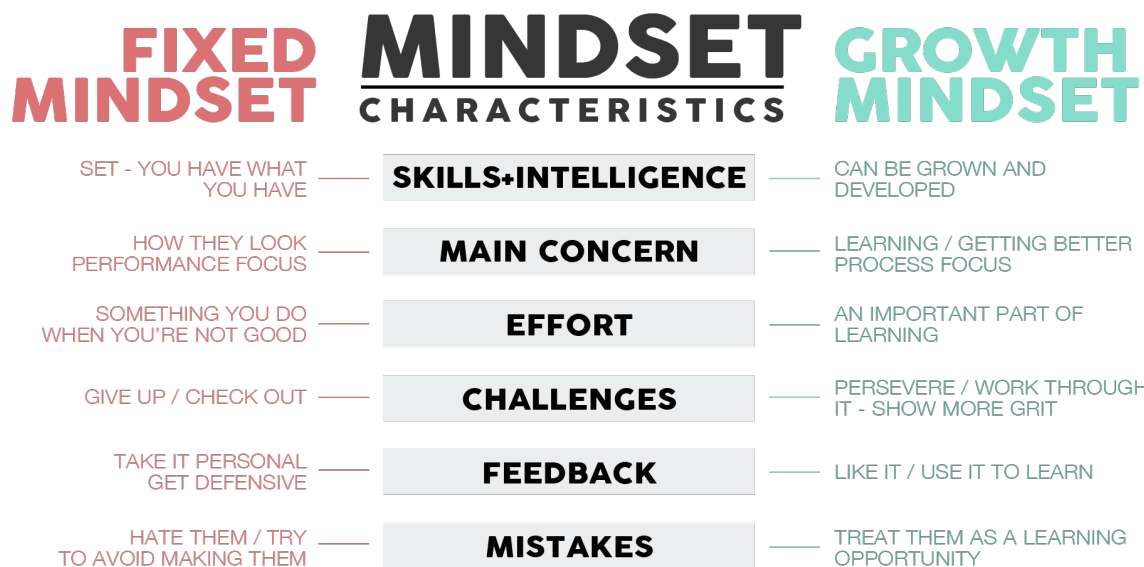
Enhanced self-awareness can happen with revolutionary speed during times of extreme stress or evolutionarily over time as we flex our [mindfulness capabilities](#).

In the face of traumatic and/or stressful events I hear some people say: "I just move on; I try to stay positive and not dwell on the past." Endless rumination can drive you into a downward spiral, but if you want to experience transformational growth, we need to embrace the lessons that life provides us, or we are destined to keep experiencing these lessons. As Socrates pointedly stated: "The unexamined life is not worth living!" PTG is positive psychological growth as result of our struggles with a highly challenging, stressful and traumatic events. PTG requires the right questions to unlock these learnings, questions like: Describe the ways in which your relationships with family and friends have been strengthened and deepened in intimacy? Unpack the ways in which you have found a different perspective on life with new opportunities? Name the things you did to survive what happened, that showed your strengths within yourself that you didn't know you had? Explain your deeper understanding of life and how to live it? Name what you are most grateful for, what you have and for those around you?

Whilst these traumatic events may have been incredibly painful, we can learn from them and grow. But self-awareness without a move to action is just an intellectual exercise. The next sections unpack how to close this loop.

**b) Self-actualisation by changing your mindset – (partly based on work by Prof. Alia Crum)**

Having the right mindset is central to long-term change. [Prof. Carol Dweck's](#) growth versus fixed mindset model reinforces how our learning and maturation are driven by which mindset we embrace. It's not personality per se, but our willingness to change that is the underlying variable. Which mindset do you embrace?



Prof Alia Crum, has repeatedly [shown](#) the ubiquitous impact of mindsets on our digestive, endocrine, cardiovascular, immune and nervous systems..a true mind-body connection!

So how do we create this mindset change? Thanks to our meta-cognitive capability we can think about our thinking. When I was in my early thirties, I was working really long hours, setting up an HR department and completing my Ph.D. at the same time. My lifestyle was anything but balanced. To make things even worse, because I was in management and in meetings a lot, free food was readily available. Coming from boarding school, my deeply imprinted survival tactic was: "see food-eat food, then go back for seconds." Consequently, I picked up a lot of weight, despite my athletic background. I rationalised away my new dimensions, by blaming the scale for being "broken", lift mirrors as being unflattering etc. But one day I had to own my new reality when I saw a picture of myself with a protruding potbelly-cameras just don't lie. I was faced with a real dilemma as I was deeply invested in making a success of my career and completing my Ph.D. studies. It dawned on me that my relationship with food was actually holding me back. Instead of having a scarcity mindset which would push me to accumulate more calories at every opportunity, I needed nutrition to be a pillar of my health regime. I applied the below RAW change mindset technique. RAW stands for: R=Recognise it; A=Accept it; W=Work it. Read through the example below and then think of what mindset is holding you back and run through the RAW methodology.

<p><b>Recognise it:</b></p> <p>Name/label the stress you are facing. In doing so it lowers your cortisol levels, makes you more open to feedback and activates your pre-frontal cortex (deliberate thought) whilst decreasing your amygdala response (seat of emotion).</p>	<p>What is stressing you: <i>My significant weight gain (16 kgs).</i></p> <p>What are your typical responses to that stress (no judgement):</p> <p>a) Emotional responses (thoughts, beliefs and feelings): <i>I need to eat now, as not sure when eating again (scarcity mindset).</i></p> <p>b) Behavioural responses (actual actions or inactions): <i>Every opportunity to eat I took advantage of the situation, often going back for seconds and thirds.</i></p> <p>c) Physiological responses: <i>Sugar highs and lows as result of unhealthy diet.</i></p>
<p><b>Accept it:</b></p> <p>It shows we care about the issue and unleashes positive motivation and makes the situation more tolerable as we know things that are NB often don't come easily. Connect to your goals/values that are at stake.</p>	<p>You have this stressor because you care about: <i>Discipline and integrity. I teach other people to lead balanced lives and look after their health but I am not practicing what I preach..I am lacking integrity. I need to lead by example.</i></p>
<p><b>Work it:</b></p> <p>Stress hormones actually assist the body and mind perform, but we need to reframe it as such otherwise it can be detrimental to our health. Sometimes in complex or longer-term situations this becomes harder to do, and we then need to reframe it into being open to the experience and learnings inherent in the situation.</p>	<p>Return to your stress reactions (Recognise it section) and your positive purpose (Accept it section). Are your typical reactions facilitating your purpose? (Y/N)</p> <p>What changes can I make in responding to stress so that it's an empowering not destructive process? <i>I can replace my unhealthy relationship with food with a more liberating mindset. My new mindset is: Each time I have an opportunity to eat, I need ask myself if this is healthy or unhealthy deposit and am I actually hungry?</i></p> <p>What are the opportunities inherent in this stress (possibilities, learnings and or insights) that arise as a result of experiencing this stress? <i>I can use this example with others when I train people around paradigm changes as many people struggle with this same issue. It also allows me to be a role-model as it creates an opportunity for me to show that I practice what I preach. It's a real live experiment with important health consequences for me.</i></p>
<p><b>Embedding it:</b> <i>I will embed this mindset by linking it to an existing daily ritual e.g. say it before I eat my meals, or when I walk through my works entrance, when putting on my seatbelt etc.</i></p> <p><i>I will embrace this new paradigm every time I interact with food, to imagine a ledger system, on the one side is healthy deposits and on the other side is unhealthy deposits. As long as 90% of the time I am on the healthy side of the ledger I will make progress.</i></p> <p><i>Personal aside: I proceeded to lose 20 kgs in 20 weeks and I have kept to my goal weight over the last 13 years. By choosing to focus first on the right paradigm, then change my behaviours I created sustainable behaviour change.</i></p>	

### c) Self-actualisation through goal setting

Many people want to change their personality traits, but can they? To answer this question, [Hudson and Fraley](#) conducted two, 16-week intensive longitudinal randomized experiments. Across both studies, people who expressed goals to change any of their Big Five personality traits tended to experience actual increases in their self-reports of that trait, as well as trait-relevant daily behaviour, over the subsequent 16 weeks. These studies suggest that people

may be able to change their self-reported personality traits through choice and represent a first step toward understanding the processes that enable people to do so.

A study by Soto published in 2015, and another by Jule Specht, suggest that positive personality changes accelerate when people are leading meaningful and satisfying lives.

SMART goals have certain limitations, which include not acknowledging the following:

- **Logic and emotion:** both head and heart appeal are essential for sustainable behaviour change. Inspiring marketing campaigns tend to have a deep emotional hook. Emotional messages are more memorable and galvanise us. At the same time many people overestimate their ability to change, or live in hope and that's where a healthy dose of head-thinking is required to ensure success.
- **Consequences:** In our work lives we are generally highly focused on achieving our business objectives as there are real consequences in terms of promotions, bonuses or the threat of termination if we don't deliver. We need to increase our "skin in the game" by identifying real punishments and rewards. The ability to change seems to be easiest when there is obvious upside/downside and we have chosen the course of action. When the change yields lukewarm benefits, an inverse Goldilocks dynamic, we struggle to stay the distance. By leveraging the power of behavioural economics, specifically loss aversion we can ramp up the stakes.
- **Support:** Often the goals we set for ourselves are contingent on others involvement, and their willingness to change as well.

In the next table I have provided an example of how to apply goal setting in a comprehensive, scientific manner that remedies some of the afore-mentioned concerns. There needs to be a granularity and clarity of thought that sets you up for success. You start at the top of the table and work your way down, covering all of the components. The only questions you leave till the end is in the first block, around commitment and confidence, which you circle back to once you have written out your plan. They are powerful questions and act as a litmus test regarding the likelihood of you achieving your goals. If you score 7 or below for the commitment question, park this goal until such time as its really important to you. Likewise, if you score 7 or below for confidence question, ask yourself what is driving this rating? Is it because your plan is flaky, you don't have the skills/knowledge/resources/time etc? And then go back to the obstacles and antidotes section and list these concerns and solutions.

Recently I have started renaming my goal-setting and talk of commitments instead..it feels more binding.



## GOAL EXAMPLE

What is my goal and why is it NB to me?

I will have exceptional vitality, in a sustainable and healthy way. This goal is crucial to me as it provides the energy for me to achieve my goals and deal with the obstacles I will need to overcome.

Achieving this goal would make a real difference to me emotionally (Y/N)?

I am 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 committed to achieving this goal.  
 I am 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 confident in achieving this goal.

	Action plan	How measure goal success	Completed by when and reward/penalty
Goal structuring	<p>Nutrition: balanced Mediterranean diet-2000 cal. per day.</p> <p>Rest: sleep 7-8 hrs per day. Have one day off per week from all work and exercise.</p> <p>Exercise: be involved in a variety of physical activities, that amounts to 10 hrs per week. 6 hrs cycling (Mon. Tue, Thur), 2 hrs tennis (Sun), 2 hr HIIT (Wed &amp; Sat).</p> <p>Work: write for first 2 hrs per day-passion.</p>	<p>Weight: body fat 12%. Measure monthly.</p> <p>Sleep: assess quality and quantity with sleep app.</p> <p>Exercise: track time and intensity with Strava (cycling) &amp; Apple Watch.</p> <p>Health: annual executive health assessment that independently checks all important physical parameters.</p>	<p>Interim reward(s): new cycling kit.</p> <p>Long-term reward: overseas trip to watch Roland Garros Grand Slam tennis with friends if effectively embed for a year.</p> <p>Punishment: donate same amount of money as overseas tennis trip arch enemy rugby supporters club.</p>
Key obstacles e.g. accessibility, affordability, attractiveness etc.	<h3>Obstacles</h3> <p>Scientific knowledge regarding latest physical exercise and nutrition practices.</p>		<h3>Antidotes</h3> <p>Go to a personal trainer once a week to ensure progress is tracked, and latest exercise techniques are learnt, specifically High Intensity Interval Training and functional training, dynamic stretching. Have a nutritionist assess my basal metabolic rate, and then develop a nutrition plan that will allow me to body fat in a sustainable and healthy manner.</p>
Support	<p>I need Wendy (wife) to modify what we eat for dinners to accommodate my new eating plan.</p> <p>Friends: socialise less around eating/drinking and more around healthy outdoor activities together e.g. mountain walks, surfing and the beach.</p>		



## Neuroplasticity goals to add to your change fit repertoire

[Here](#) are some of the newest and most exciting developments in the neuroscience world, specifically relating to neuroplasticity:

1. [Enriched environments](#) (saturated with novelty, focused attention, and challenge) are critical for promoting neuroplasticity, and can provoke growth and positive adaptation long after the “critical learning period” of early childhood and young adulthood is over;
2. [As few as ten ~1-hour sessions](#) of cognitive training over 5 or 6 weeks have the potential to reverse the same amount of age-related decline that has been observed in the same time period;
3. [Physical activity and good physical fitness](#) can prevent or slow the normal age-related neuronal death and damage to the hippocampus, and even increase the volume of the hippocampus (long-term and spatial memory hub) and [cerebellum](#) (co-ordination and muscle memory);
4. [Intermittent fasting](#) can promote adaptive responses in synapses;
5. [Chronic insomnia](#) is associated with atrophy (neuronal death and damage) in the hippocampus, while adequate sleep may enhance neurogenesis.

### **d) Self-awareness/actualisation: When goal setting fails!! Then the Immunity to change toolkit might unlock new paths...**

We know too well the sobering truth of February: change is hard, and even harder to maintain. Harvard Graduate School of Education professors [Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey](#) posit that the problem isn't a lack of willpower. Rather, they believe that failure to meet our goals may be the result of an emotional immune system that helps protect us from the fallout that can come from change, namely disappointment and shame.

When embracing change, you'll confront your core values and operating assumptions. Square off with the motivations that have been driving your decisions and determine whether those forces, such as stature, perfectionism, or risk aversion, are still relevant. If you are open to revising your guiding assumptions, you will find it easier to achieve your desired change.

To uncover the issues that are inhibiting change and identify opportunities for improvement, Kegan and Lahey developed a four-step framework for tracking goals, overcoming perceived barriers, and outlining productive actions. Herewith with is a completed example that I devised.

ASPIRATION	REALITY	ICEBERGS	NEW REALITY
<p><b>Goal I set for myself and action plan:</b></p> <p>Create a balanced life where I invest in my physical, mental, spiritual and socio-emotional needs.</p>	<p><b>My behaviours in relation to the goal:</b></p> <p><b>Positive action(s):</b>  <i>Read widely how to live this balanced life.  Identified an action plan.</i></p> <p><b>Negative or omission action(s):</b>  <i>Focused predominantly on growing my business.  Worked every weekend, and long hours to meet ambitious targets.  Did not turn away client requests irrespective of how busy I was.  Stopped exercising regularly.</i></p>	<p><b>Competing hidden commitments (fears):</b>  <i>Consulting is very unpredictable, and I might not be able to make ends meet.  I will lose my nest egg and jeopardize my family's future.  Fear that I will be a failure and must return to formal employment.  Therefore, I must prioritise work over all other priorities to avoid losing it all!!!</i></p> <p><b>Known obstacles:</b>  <i>Demanding clients, competitive space.  I have many other time demands as have busy family as well.  I tend to over-stretch and am a workaholic by nature.</i></p>	<p><b>My limiting assumption(s):</b>  <i>Its feast or famine as a consultant. Success is ALL about having lots clients and billable hrs.</i></p> <p><b>Big AHA insight:</b>  <i>My definition of success is warped, I have focused only on extrinsic factors (clients praise and billable hours), when I should also be looking at intrinsic factors (my broader sense of purpose and fulfilment) to determine my true success. I must define success for myself, otherwise others will define it for me, and not in a way that I will probably appreciate.</i></p> <p><b>Liberating assumption going forward:</b>  <i>Success is about achieving in ALL the different facets of my life (work, social, spiritual and mental) whilst having both the opportunities and time to focus on that which I am most passionate about.  I am seeking fulfilment (long-term) over happiness (which is fleeting).</i></p>
<p><b>Capture an important goal you have set.</b></p>	<p>Capture what you did/didn't do (behaviours) in trying to achieve your goal. Just identify them, don't explain them.</p>	<p>What are your fears in achieving this goal? Look at column 1 as an accelerator and column 3 as a brake. Are you "protecting" yourself from a feared, undesirable outcome?</p>	<p>Are your assumptions accurate regarding your context? What tangible evidence is there, or is there counter-evidence?</p>

The third column (Icebergs) refers to those hidden assumptions, that like icebergs lie below the water line that can sink your aspirational goals. By being able to see (like an X-ray) what may be your sub-conscious driver(s), through what you actually do in column 2 (your behaviours) you get closer to why you may be not getting the traction you desire. Then you need to replace this limiting assumption(s) in column 4 with a new liberating assumption that is not in opposition to your aspirational goal.

Once you have identified the new liberating assumption its essential that you then convert this into tangible behaviours. In this instance, the person started creating "oasis breaks" every 3 months where they took a full week off (they were independent contractors), and also ensured that every 2<sup>nd</sup> weekend was free from work activities.

In conclusion, you have the tools to make change a reality. We must all suffer one of two pains, it's your choice.....



**SUFFER THE PAIN  
OF DISCIPLINE  
OR  
SUFFER THE PAIN  
OF REGRET**