

# COACHING CLIENTS THROUGH THE CROSSROADS OF CHANGE

Understand five key principles to help clients change longtime habits and behaviours.

BY Jim Gavin



**C**lients want change. Whether they desire weight loss, fitness gains, better health or personal fulfillment, clients pay coaches and trainers to get results. Their expectations may, however, be problematic. Not only might their goals be unrealistic, but the responsibility for affecting change may be cast largely on the shoulders of the health fitness professional. Metaphorically speaking, they may act as if they are dropping a car off at a mechanics' shop – hoping they can come back later with all in good repair.

As John Henry Newman, the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, remarked, “To live is to change. To live well is to change often.” One would think that with the constant press for change in our lives, most of us would have developed a kind of roadmap to

guide us through the stages of change. Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be the case. Whether as a personal trainer or a lifestyle fitness coach, a key to your success lies in understanding what clients go through in making major life transitions.

I want to give you an inside view of your clients' worlds as they attempt to alter long-term habits or behaviours. Committing to regular exercise or changing lifestyle patterns often entails deep level restructuring of thoughts, feelings and actions. Here are five important principles to remember in your work:

## PRINCIPLE 1: LIFE CHANGES ARE TYPICALLY PROVOKED BY CRISIS AND CALAMITY.

As much as we like to think of ourselves as rational animals, Sigmund Freud and a host of other psychological experts put an end to that mythology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact is that we hold on to our “comfort zones,” no matter how unhealthy or short-sighted those worlds may be. We are creatures of habit, and those habits may include smoking, eating unwisely, and treating our bodies as if they can withstand unlimited abuse. You may say, “That's not me,” and indeed many of your habits may be good ones, yet they are nonetheless habits.

Motivation for big change in clients' lives typically comes from significant and unexpected events – a job change, a relationship shift or a scary medical report. It's also true that clients may accumulate a number of unsatisfying moments until a final insult becomes the proverbial “straw that breaks the camel's back.”

### Practice Implication:

When clients hire you, expect that something significant has shifted inside them that propels them to want change *now!* The moment is ripe, yet it's important to understand what is fueling this desire for change.

## PRINCIPLE 2: MAJOR LIFE CHANGES TAKE PLACE IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY.

Even when someone has been through significant twists and turns in life, big change isn't something one gets used to. We forget how we managed to get through the last one. A client who has stopped smoking or changed eating habits

and who now wants to become fit may simply not remember the internal struggle that occurred in making those other changes. Our psyches have a convenient “delete” mechanism. We forget the bad times and remember the good ones. This is how we survive. Yet, when we're in the midst of change once again, our ‘amnesia’ blocks awareness of what we need to do to make it through this one successfully.

**Practice Implication:** This is where coaches and trainers come in as guides. You provide an understanding of change dynamics. You offer the road map. When the lights go out on your client's rational awareness, you show up with your night vision.

## “WHEN CLIENTS BECOME INCENSED THAT THEY HAVEN’T LOST 20 POUNDS BY THE END OF THEIR FIRST MONTH OF TRAINING, YOU NEED TO KNOW THEIR REACTIVITY IS PART OF THEIR PROCESS. IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU.”

### PRINCIPLE 3: CONFUSION AND THE “BLAME GAME” MARK THE CLIENT’S ENTRY INTO THE CHANGE PROCESS.

When clients are unceremoniously dumped on the ground outside their old comfort zones, confusion prevails. How did I get here? Who did this to me? Someone has to be responsible? Whether the finger of blame points toward others or themselves, clients look for a place to deposit all the uncomfortable feelings they are experiencing. Rather than try to take away their feelings with soothing words such as, “No one’s to blame” or “That was then, this is now – let’s move on,” your work is to make room for their reactions and to be compassionate. They need to see themselves in the mirror, to confront reality and to ground themselves in the present. Only through the expression of long-buried or denied emotions can they create space for new experience. This doesn’t mean they will interminably wallow in self-pity or anger, rather they learn to graft your compassion onto their perspectives and thereby gain strength for the next part of their journey.

**Practice Implication:** *It’s not personal.* When clients become incensed that they haven’t lost 20 pounds by the end of their first month of training, you need to know their reactivity is part of their process. It’s not about you. Big life change confronts people with lots of ghosts, and it is sometimes hard for them to contain all they are experiencing. You don’t have to defend yourself – and you don’t have to take responsibility for their feelings. They will live through it, especially if you continue to hold up a compassionate mirror to their current reality.

### PRINCIPLE 4: WHEN EMOTIONS SUBSIDE, IT’S TIME TO EXPLORE.

When clients release their strangleholds on people they might be angry with, they uncover energy for exploration – they create space for new adventures. As a coach or trainer, now’s the time to play! When clients have made peace with themselves, they are ready for action. This is the time to introduce them to their options. It’s not yet time for commitment. Get them to try out new behaviors, to sample different activities, to check out possible solutions – in an exploratory, playful manner. At this juncture, they are inquisitive. Link them with others on the path of discovery. Suggest books and articles that feed their imagination. Ignite their passions with ideas and novel experience.

**Practice Implication:** Your role shifts now to that of tour guide. You are not trying to close the deal. You want to widen their horizons – they have been looking inward long enough. While keeping them engaged with an initial routine, such as cardio and weight training, you want them to get acquainted with their emerging identities. This means experimenting, rather than solidifying.

### PRINCIPLE 5: WHEN NOVELTY WANES, IT’S TIME FOR COMMITMENT.

Clients who have been exploring for awhile will begin to settle into routines. They will gravitate toward their passions. Their natural wisdom will direct them toward home. As their energy for new experience diminishes, know that this signals the moment to solidify commitments. Now is the time to revisit initial intentions and goals and to help them with detailed planning about their futures. They want to settle into a new and better comfort zone – and now’s the time.

**Practice Implication:** Don’t feel rejected! When clients begin showing greater self-determination and less reliance on your guidance, there’s nothing wrong. It’s a natural progression. Whether it is weeks or months or even years, eventually clients will become more independent and want to make the final design touches on their own. Endings give way to new beginnings, but first you and your clients need to acknowledge the progress, celebrate and say goodbye – at least for now. FTC

**Next issue:** This four-part lifestyle fitness coaching series concludes next week with “Clubs with Coaching Cultures.”

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