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.’

“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.

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 of leaving home, fear of leaving her partner. However, she didn’t let this stop her from making changes. “The scariest part of change is not so much the letting go of an unhappy situation, but uncertainty over what comes next.”
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 anger) and 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 look at change and action. Leaving may not be your only option.’

Brenda Davies, who has worked as a pharmacist, consultant, and a specialist in the psychology of decision-making.

‘If you tend to procrastinate, then enlist an action buddy who will hold your feet to the fire. And if you’re other extreme, while the other person be triggered into shouting or storming out. Identify your triggers in terms of metaphorical hilltops and valleys: we need the hilltop to see how far we’ve come and that 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 weumble, have burnt out, or are so stressed that we know we’re no longer at our best, to let go and serenely glide into the valley to rest, recover, repair, prepare, then rise like phoenixes from the ashes.’

There is no science to the perfect way we are experiencing a lesson.”

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 Rozenthuler 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 other extreme, while the other person be triggered into shouting or storming out. Identify your triggers in terms of metaphorical hilltops and valleys: we need the hilltop to see how far we’ve come and that 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 weumble, have burnt out, or are so stressed that we know we’re no longer at our best, to let go and serenely glide into the valley to rest, recover, repair, prepare, then rise like phoenixes from the ashes.’

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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 engaged in their favourite TV show.
- Ease into the conversation with a rambling preamble. It makes other people anxious and references from your employer in the future.

Surprisingly, the experts agree that intuition is a big factor in knowing 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. 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 look at change and action. Leaving may not be your only option.

‘Most of us struggle after an ending,’ says chartered psychologist Sarah Rozenthuler. ‘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 experiences. We may experience a real block to moving on, explains Rozenthuler. ‘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 into 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 then a next. Some experts believe it makes sense to make time to find a new vision. Whatever happens, it is natural for decisions to come 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 sense to make time to find a new vision. Whatever happens, it is natural for decisions to come next.

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