

A backbone to nurture change

By Ruth Ostrow

ALMOST every week I receive letters from people who are trying to change an aspect of their lives. Those who want to leave unfulfilling relationships, people who are tired of their careers, bodies, the state of their health, or who simply want to break out of old patterns that are unhelpful to overall happiness.

It's a sign of the times that people want to explore their lifestyle options. But if my experience and readers' comments are anything to go by, more often than not our desire for change is met with defeat.

Many of us limp along in a state of trying -- almost getting it together, but failing and falling into despondency. One New Age course I attended laughingly called this trying to sit down, caught somewhere in an embarrassing squat with bum never quite meeting chair.

Change is healthy, transformative and difficult to achieve. But I was given a very helpful insight the other day on how to make meaningful changes by a most unlikely source: my osteopath. I had gone to her to have my spine adjusted because endless work at the computer plays havoc with my shoulders and arms despite best ergonomic efforts. As things were being crunched back into place she said something simple but profound.

"The muscles in the top area of your back are not strong enough to keep you aligned. I can put your spine back into place but it will only come out again. What can you do to support yourself?"

I found this worth repeating. What positive acts are we putting into our lives to strengthen the muscles around our backbone so we don't slip back into the old routines, old familiar arguments, old behaviours we've become habituated to, or go back to addictions which are life rafts with holes in them?

The osteopath came up with an exercise regime which will support my spine. In the same way, I believe people have to come up with a program that can help them to achieve whatever it is they want.

Yes, it's unwise to go to a pub if you are trying to give up alcohol. But avoidance alone is negative. Having just attended a two-day course with world expert Robert Svoboda in ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of healing, which includes yoga, diet and healthy lifestyle, I have discovered that it's very much part of Eastern thinking not to just give up one form of behaviour that is bad but also to incorporate new behaviours that are reinforcing, comforting and good.

For instance, a person giving up cigarettes would focus on taking up some gorgeous, nurturing activity that encouraged positive chemical releases in the brain -- beach walking, dancing or something pleasurable like being massaged daily.

All this sounds obvious but it's alarming how often we revert back to subtle beliefs, patterns and self-speak that drag us down because we don't do positive, backbone-building exercises around the vulnerable spot in our souls. I know many women who have left toxic relationships, only to end up back in them because they didn't take the time to build up interests, careers or activities that

gave them enough joy to counteract the sudden depletion of feel-good chemicals like PEA and oxytocin that are released during sex and intimacy.

According to research, most things we do are governed by the body's natural chemicals and hormones. People go back to eating chocolate or fatty foods because their tissues are not feeling nourished by other things in their lives, primarily affection. Others fall back into depression because they're not changing the things they tell themselves, which reduces the flow of feel-good hormones and impedes their immune system. As one therapist put it: We would never let anyone talk to us the way we talk to ourselves each day.

Yet others revert back to frenetic activity, drugs or workaholism because they have exhausted their adrenal glands over time, aren't producing enough natural energy and don't know how else to support the body's needs except by artificially stimulating themselves.

According to Eastern medicine, our bodies and minds often become habituated to thinking that pain or discomfort is normal, when it's just a bad habit. So, as my osteopath pointed out, our proverbial "spines" need to be retrained then supported by holistic nurturing in all facets of our life.

We need a diet that helps us: soothing foods for inner peace; stimulating foods if we need perking up; warm foods to counteract a cold, depressing period.

Similarly, we need friends who don't keep reinforcing our old beliefs just because they're frightened we'll abandon them. It's important to make our environments, the temperature around us, our relationships and the words we tell ourselves align with our ultimate aims.

Basically, we must support change on physical, biological, and emotional levels. The best way to sit down, as the adage goes, is to make sure our pants aren't too tight. And on a positive note to make sure there's a nice, safe, comfy chair to land our bums on.

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