

Want to Make a Change? Conjure Your ‘Possible Selves.’

Imagining a different future can help motivate you, experts say.

By Joanne Lipman

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4 MIN READ

Years ago, as a young business reporter, I interviewed an advertising executive who ran a fast-food chain account. I was there to ask about the latest campaign. But when I sat down, he wanted to talk about writing fiction. He spent hours meeting with clients and crafting slogans, but he dreamed of being a novelist instead.

I remember thinking: Sure, you and everybody else.

A decade or so later, however, I was surprised to see the adman on TV, holding up his new book. James Patterson had morphed from advertising executive into best-selling author. He has since published more than 100 New York Times best sellers and co-authored books with the likes of Bill Clinton and Dolly Parton.

“Maybe I was delusional, but I never thought of myself as an advertising person,” he told me when I asked how he’d done it. “I always planned to be a writer. I hoped to be a writer. It was always in my head.”

Mr. Patterson’s ability to see himself as a writer illustrates a concept known as “possible selves.” It describes how people envision their futures: what they may become, or want to become, or even fear becoming.

The term, coined in 1986 by the social psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, grew out of research on self-concept and self-perception. While self-concepts — “I am a kind person” or “I am a good parent” — are rooted in the present, the researchers found that people are also informed by ideas about what they might become and how they might change.

These possible selves, both positive and negative, are closely related to motivation. A violin student who envisions life as a professional musician might be motivated to practice. A person whose feared possible self is an alcoholic may become a teetotaler. In a small study, when young adults were prompted to envision themselves as either regular exercisers (hoped-for selves) or inactive (feared selves), both groups exercised more in the weeks afterward. And researchers have found that conjuring positive possible selves can improve well-being and alleviate symptoms of depression by holding out the potential for a better future.

A possible self can take you beyond daydreams, which are often fleeting and not necessarily grounded in reality. It can come to fruition “if you build a bridge from your ‘now’ self to the possible self,” Dr. Markus said. But how do we construct that bridge? Here are steps you can try:

Take action.

If you’re regularly dreaming of a different career, enroll in a course, shadow someone, take up a hobby or a side job. Making the transition “requires you to say now, today, this week, these are the steps I can actually take” to attain that goal, said Daphna Oyserman, a psychology professor at the University of Southern California.

But don’t quit your job just yet. An analysis of career-transition research concluded that successful reinventions require adjustments and re-evaluations as you go. Mr. Patterson, for example, wrote almost a dozen books while still at his ad agency; he found his style only after many tries.

Find an expert companion.

“We have a certain degree of difficulty in seeing our own” abilities, said Richard Tedeschi, a psychologist who helped pioneer the concept in his work on post-traumatic growth.

An expert companion doesn’t have to be a therapist; it can be a supportive person who knows your strengths and weaknesses — and opens your eyes to potential selves you hadn’t considered. The restaurateur Danny Meyer was planning to go to law school until an uncle pointed out that Mr. Meyer had always been obsessed with food and that he should consider opening a restaurant — a possible self that Mr. Meyer said “I wasn’t able to see” until then.

Once you have a goal, share it.

Doing so makes you more likely to achieve it. A 2015 study of adults between ages 23 and 72 found that more than 70 percent of those who sent weekly updates to a friend completed their goals, twice the percentage of those who didn't share written goals. That finding held true regardless of the objectives, which included increasing productivity, improving work-life balance and writing a book chapter.

Reach out to your weak ties.

As you think through next steps, try looking toward dormant ties (people with whom you haven't spoken in years) or weak ties (people you know only casually). Reams of research, including an analysis of LinkedIn data, have found that, whether you're job hunting or seeking breakthrough advice, people in your larger network are more likely to help surface fresh ideas than those closest to you are. And don't be afraid to take that first step. In one study, [How to Reconnect for Maximum Impact, Jorge Walter, Daniel Z. Levin, and J. Keith Murnighan, February 23, 2016] executives who were told to seek advice from a dormant tie felt anxious beforehand, yet 90 percent of them reported afterward that the experience was enjoyable — and fun.

Joanne Lipman is the author of the new book "NEXT! The Power of Reinvention in Life and Work," from which this article is adapted.