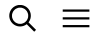


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6 Principles for Navigating Challenges in Life

Constant adaptation is the key to lifelong endurance



By Brad Stulberg

Published
May 6, 2021

The world around us is constantly changing. And as the coronavirus pandemic has shown, much of this change is outside of our control. In an average adult life, a person experiences 36 significant disruptions (<https://www.amazon.com/Life-Transitions-Mastering-Change-Any/dp/1594206821>), from switching jobs, to moving, to facing a significant injury or illness, to having a child, to losing a loved one. As the old adage goes, the only constant is change.

Even so, change, disruption, and disorder remain uncomfortable concepts for most people. Yet we can learn to survive—and even thrive—in their midst. If this seems unimaginable, it's because we've been going about it all wrong. Common pitfalls around change include attempting to avoid it, refusing to acknowledge it, actively resisting it, sacrificing agency, and striving to get back to the way things were. The last point is particularly timely, as evidenced by the countless (<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2021/02/how-soon-will-covid-19-vaccines-return-life-normal>) headlines

(<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/life-return-normal-covid-experts-summer-fall/story?id=76277557>). pontificating on how long it will take to “return to normal” after the pandemic.

These pitfalls didn’t come out of thin air. They are largely a consequence of homeostasis, the prevailing model of change since it was first conceptualized (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fphys.2020.00200/full>) 160 years ago by a French doctor named Claude Bernard. Homeostasis says that living systems resist change and desire constancy above all else. It views change as a cycle of order, disorder, and then order. It posits that the goal is to return to stability: to get back, or at least close, to where you started as swiftly as possible.

There’s only one problem: homeostasis isn’t all that accurate when it comes to how change actually unfolds.

More recent research

(<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232601628> Allotasis A New Paradigm to Explain Arousal Pathology), conducted by University of Pennsylvania neuroscientist, physiologist, and professor of medicine Peter Sterling and his collaborator, a biologist named Joseph Ayer, shows that in the vast majority of circumstances, healthy living systems do not rigidly resist change. Rather, they adapt to it, moving forward with grace and grit. Sterling and Ayer called this allostasis, which literally means “stability through change.”

Unlike homeostasis, which describes a pattern of order, disorder, order (X to Y to X), allostasis describes a pattern of order, disorder, reorder (X to Y to Z).

Consider a few common examples: If you start lifting weights regularly, the skin on your hands will almost always become disturbed. Instead of futilely trying to stay smooth, eventually it will develop calluses so it can better meet the challenge. If you are accustomed to constantly shifting your attention in a digital world, your brain will, at first, resist reading a book with no distractions. But if you stay at it, eventually your brain adapts, literally rewiring itself for focus. If you experience a serious injury, be it physical or emotional, recovery is not returning to how you once were; it’s moving forward and arriving at someplace new, usually with a greater tolerance for pain and distress, and more compassion for others going through similar situations.

“The key goal of regulation is not rigid constancy,” writes (<https://www.amazon.com/What-Health-Allostasis-Evolution-Design/dp/0262043300>) Sterling. “Rather, it is the flexible capacity for adaptive variation.” In layperson’s terms: change is not something that passively happens *to* you, but rather something you are in regular conversation *with*. But it means you have to work at it, and navigating change is a skill you can develop.

If this leaves you feeling a bit uncomfortable, you aren’t alone. When I first confronted the ubiquity of change—the reality of impermanence—it made me uncomfortable, too. I am a person who craves stability. I like to have a plan and stick to it. Many of my coaching (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/07/opinion/pandemic-wall-fitness-running.html>) clients are the same.

Yet as I started doing more research on how to navigate change and disorder, I realized the goal is not to be stable and therefore never change. Nor is the goal to sacrifice all sense of stability, passively surrendering yourself to the whims of life. Instead the goal is to meet somewhere in the middle, to be both grounded and accepting of change. I’ve come to call it rugged flexibility.

To be rugged is to be tough, determined, and durable. To be flexible is to adapt and bend easily without breaking. Put them together and the result is a gritty endurance, an anti-fragility that not only withstands change but can thrive in its midst. The principles and practices below can help you develop rugged flexibility.

Open Up to Change

In a seminal 1949 [study](https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Bruner/Cards/) (<https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Bruner/Cards/>), by the Harvard psychologists Jerome Bruner and Leo Postman, individuals were briefly exposed to a deck of playing cards containing anomalies, such as a red six of spades or a black four of hearts, and then were asked to report what they saw. Whereas subjects who were open to change only had to see the cards a few times before reporting correctly, those who were most resistant to change had to see the anomalous cards more than 40 times before they changed their perceptions and recognized the abnormalities. Not only that, but these experimental subjects experienced acute distress and disorientation during the process.

Whether it's job loss, injury, illness, or aging, the more you open up to change, the sooner you'll be able to see and accept reality for what it is, and thus move forward in productive ways. Remember that change is largely what you make of it. [Research](https://mbl.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/crumetal_mindsethreachallenge_8.27.16.pdf) (https://mbl.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/crumetal_mindsethreachallenge_8.27.16.pdf) shows that if you can shift your mindset in a way that conceives of change as a challenge rather than a threat, you'll experience better outcomes. Instead of resisting or shutting down amid change, try to view it as an opportunity to evolve and grow. One way to do this is to stop using the word *change* altogether—after all, language shapes reality—and start using the word *adaptation* instead. When you feel internal resistance to what is happening around you, instead of shutting down, use that as a cue to engage.

Build Strength and Adaptability

When he was in his twenties, Roger Federer dominated tennis by winning long and drawn-out points at the baseline. As he aged, however, his raw athleticism declined, especially compared with younger competitors. Rather than resisting this, Federer adapted his approach to the game. He included more [rest and recovery](#) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/12/sports/tennis/roger-federer-atp-finals.html>) in his schedule, and he started playing more of a serve-and-volley style of tennis, which lends itself to faster points and is less dependent on athleticism and more dependent on skill. "I've had to adapt my game to the new generation of players, where everybody can hit hard at the baseline now," Federer [told](#) (<https://www.express.co.uk/sport/tennis/1085705/Roger-Federer-Swiss-star-Novak-Djokovic-Rafael-Nadal>) ESPN Radio in a 2019 interview. "That's maybe not exactly how I played 20 years ago."

Flexibility without strength leads to instability, but strength without flexibility leads to rigidity. In the midst of change, it can be helpful to identify your core values, the few things that make you who you are, the hills that you'll die on. For Federer, this was about playing tennis and competing hard. Outside of those core values, be willing to adapt.

Expect It to Be Hard

If you are running a marathon and think it will feel easy at mile 20, you are in for a rude awakening, one that will probably lead to you dropping out of the race. If, however, you expect mile 20 to feel awful, you'll be prepared to grind. Perhaps on a good race day, you'll even be pleasantly surprised. [Research](#) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3037529/>) shows that our expectations of an event play a large part in determining our response to it. In the example given above, if your expectations are accurate, you'll release less cortisol—the stress hormone—when you hit mile 20, saving precious physiological and psychological resources to help you finish the race strong.

Yet far too often, people go into periods of change and disorder with over-the-top optimism. This backfires for one of two reasons: deep down you know you're faking it, so angst, doubt, and insecurity can take root; or you fully believe your rosy story, and thus when the going gets tough, you become overwhelmed, panicky, and desperate. A far better approach is what behavioral scientists call [tragic optimism](#) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/opinion/coronavirus-mental-health.html>): learning how to maintain hope and find meaning in life despite acknowledging inescapable pain, loss, and suffering. Here's a [mantra](#) (<https://www.outsideonline.com/2399079/mantras-performance-fitness-success>) I like to use to

practice this concept: *This is what is happening right now. It's really hard. But might as well do the best I can and see the light where there is some.*

Research (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2755263/>) shows that people who practice tragic optimism are more resilient and suffer less during change. They acknowledge that change and disorder are going to be difficult, prepare accordingly, and then trudge forward with a measured but positive attitude nonetheless.

Become Diverse and Robust

In the year or so leading up to her retirement, I spent a lot of time on the phone with [Shalane Flanagan](https://www.outsideonline.com/2281741/shalane-flanagan-how-achieve-peak-performance) (<https://www.outsideonline.com/2281741/shalane-flanagan-how-achieve-peak-performance>), the best-ever American women's distance runner. A four-time Olympian and a New York City Marathon champion, Flanagan had put loads of energy into the sport. Something we talked about often is that while running is a big part of who Flanagan is, it isn't all she is. She is also an avid reader, a chef, an author, a mentor, a coach, and, most recently, a mom.

When it came time for Flanagan to transition from competitive running at the end of 2019, she was able to lean into these other identities. Though it was still devastatingly hard for her to retire, she didn't experience a complete loss of herself when she did. Having a broad identity helped her get through.

Though Flanagan may be an extreme example, this principle applies broadly. The wider your knowledge, skills, experiences, and perspectives, the better. If you can cultivate a diverse and robust identity, you can take a blow in one part of your system but move forward in others.

Respond Rather than React

In his classic book *Man's Search for Meaning* (https://www.amazon.com/Mans-Search-Meaning-Viktor-Frankl/dp/0807014265/ref=pd_lpo_14_t_o/133-5933184-1469852?encoding=UTF8&pd_rd_i=0807014265&pd_rd_r=fdf75e-d294-45dc-8c6e-fe5222286776&pd_rd_w=JegnJ&pd_rd_wg=C27NB&pf_rd_p=2eae1586-a44a-4b21-997a-1dfc1740e496&pf_rd_r=J3CY3MFX3NTJBawnJ6N1&psc=1&refRID=J3CY3MFX3NTJBawnJ6N1), the Holocaust survivor and philosopher Viktor Frankl wrote, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Whereas reacting is automatic and irrational, responding is thoughtful and deliberate. When you respond, you maintain agency or a sense of control, which is associated with better outcomes during times of disorder, according to the [work](https://www.amazon.com/Surviving-Survival-Art-Science-Resilience/dp/0393346633) (<https://www.amazon.com/Surviving-Survival-Art-Science-Resilience/dp/0393346633>) of Laurence Gonzales, an author and a scholar at the [Santa Fe Institute](https://www.santafe.edu/) (<https://www.santafe.edu/>).

In my [coaching practice](https://www.bradstulberg.com/) (<https://www.bradstulberg.com/>), I've developed a simple heuristic to help clients respond, not react. I call it the [four P's](https://thegrowtheq.com/a-simple-formula-for-responding-not-reacting/) (<https://thegrowtheq.com/a-simple-formula-for-responding-not-reacting/>): *pause*, *process* what is happening, make a *plan*, and then *proceed*. This system helps to create space and reassert agency during what otherwise feels like chaos.

Make Meaning on the Other Side

Despite practicing the aforementioned principles, sometimes periods of change and disorder still feel utterly discombobulating. During these moments, it can be helpful to release from any sense of capitalization, growth, or search for meaning in favor of being [kind to yourself](https://thegrowtheq.com/self-compassion/) (<https://thegrowtheq.com/self-compassion/>), accepting where you are, and simply [getting through](https://t.co/3cWaJgzS7T) (<https://t.co/3cWaJgzS7T>). Research (<https://www.amazon.com/Stumbling-Happiness-Daniel->

[Gilbert/dp/1400077427](#)). conducted by the Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert shows that we look back on challenging periods of disorder in a much more productive and meaningful light than we experience them. In other words: sometimes nothing makes sense and you don't grow until you get to the other side, and that's OK.

Developing and sticking to a routine can help you endure these times. During immense changes, motivation tends to wane. Routines serve as bedrocks of predictability, creating a sense of order amid chaos. They're also helpful because they automate action: you don't have to exert any additional energy getting psyched up or thinking about what you ought to do.

An example of this is the ultra-endurance athlete and writer [Katie Arnold](https://www.outsideonline.com/1746806/katie-arnold) (<https://www.outsideonline.com/1746806/katie-arnold>). During her father's progressive ailment and eventual death, Arnold used a regular running routine to help her get out of bed every morning and to prevent her from being swallowed by grief. Arnold [told me](#) (<https://thegrowtheq.com/katie-arnold/>) that her daily runs not only helped her to activate, but they also served as a solid foundation during a period of her life when everything else felt shaky.

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