

Chapter 8

An Optimistic Future for Intentional Changes

Four main themes emerged from our 180 exploratory interviews and our 150 final interviews. As the interview results accumulated from various regions, I became more and more impressed by the consistency and importance of these four themes.

The first theme is the size and success of the intentional changes that men and women achieve. Only 4% failed to identify any intentional change at all from the previous two years. Of those who did identify a change, only 3% saw that change as small, trivial, petty, or unimportant. Over 30% of the changes were seen as huge, enormous, or of central importance. People changed their job or responsibilities, their self-perception and human relationships, their enjoyable activities and volunteer helping activities, their residence location and personal finances, and their physical health. The typical change was conspicuous enough to be noticed by seven people.

Most men and women are reasonably successful in achieving the changes that they choose. On the average, people achieve 80% of their target. Half of our interviewees had achieved 100%.

The high benefits from intentional changes provide the second salient theme in our interviews. Only 7% of the interviewees felt that their change had not contributed to their happiness, satisfaction with life, or well-being: 51% said their change had contributed

a large or enormous amount. In addition, most changes provided benefits to family, friends, employer, or other persons.

On the average, the changing person assumes about 70% of the responsibility for all of the subtasks involved in three major tasks: choosing the change, planning the strategy, and implementing the change. This central position and importance of the changing person is the third theme to emerge. Most changes are largely do-it-yourself right from the initial consideration of the potential change through to the implementation. Most people receive some help from at least one friend, family member, or other nonprofessional. Most of this help is obtained in one-to-one interaction rather than in a group. Much less help was received from counselors, educators, doctors, personnel managers, clergy, social workers, therapists, growth group leaders, and other people who help as part of their job. Professional help contributed a great deal to some change efforts, but was not even present in many successful efforts. Apparently people are quite capable of successfully choosing, planning, and achieving significant changes largely on their own, with some help from friends and other nonprofessionals.

At the same time we must note that people do encounter difficulties and obstacles. They sometimes have trouble clarifying and choosing the most appropriate target for change, discovering the best strategy for achieving that change, or actually implementing the chosen strategy. Despite their eventual success, people report that they could benefit from additional help and competence. This fourth theme leads us to consider fresh directions for practice and policy. How could we be more useful to people as they choose and guide their own changes?

Significant Directions for Policy and Practice

In my optimistic vision of the future of intentional changes, I see policymakers and professional practitioners exploring several useful directions. The sum total of these fresh efforts will be highly significant for the entire range of intentional changes. Without unduly controlling or taking over the person's change efforts, we could be of great benefit to people in several new ways. As a result, people will be even more competent and successful than they are now in choosing and achieving important beneficial changes. Seven particular directions seem to me most likely to prove highly beneficial. I hope that many people in various occupations and settings will experiment with each direction.

1. Helping people become more competent at managing their intentional changes is a particularly fascinating, difficult, and important direction. We could try accomplishing this through print, tapes, television, groups, courses, counseling sessions, speeches, and workshops. Through these various means we could help people gain increased awareness and knowledge of intentional changes, simultaneously counteracting their self-deprecating and false beliefs about their own changes. Then people could more accurately see the effectiveness and success of their own natural change process. People could also become even more competent at performing the various tasks and steps required for successful changes, and at defining and obtaining the help they need.

2. Fresh sorts of help with goals and planning could be highly beneficial for many changes. Through a variety of media and settings and processes, we can develop better help with choosing goals and directions for change, and with choosing broad strategies and paths. Different people need help with different aspects, such as a broad framework or perspective for considering various particular options, an overview of the available changes and paths, an appropriate balance or budget for time and money, accurate self-insight and self-assessment, information about particular changes and methods, a series of intermediate goals, encouragement, and behavioral self-control principles.

3. We could improve and expand the information that is available about particular opportunities, methods, and resources. As information becomes more complete and accurate, and more readily available, people will choose and use more effective paths for their various changes.

4. Some people have been complaining recently about undue restrictions on their freedom to choose their resources for change. Each of us involved in any way in the professional helping enterprise should carefully study all sides of the issues and then thoughtfully work out a personal position that seems both fair and appropriate.

5. In addition to reducing any undue restrictions on freedom of choice, we can strive to widen even further the range of opportunities and resources available for change. Each agency, educational institution, professional practitioner, and field can usefully consider ways to provide additional content, methods, tools, paths, and media.

6. Improving the ongoing support available from nonprofessionals is another significant direction for fostering intentional changes. We could help a wide range of people become more effective as informal helpers. In addition, we could help people find individual nonprofessional helpers, a peer group, or a partner in change. Generally encouraging the self-help movement and the women's movement could also be useful.

7. Improving the effectiveness of professional and paraprofessional helpers is a particularly important direction for policy and practice. Helpers can improve by seeking feedback, discussing problems and new methods with colleagues, attending workshops and meetings, learning about intentional changes through reading or a few interviews. It is especially important for professional helpers to become adept at providing an optimum amount of control in the helping relationship, steering clear of the two extremes of overcontrol and undercontrol. Some efforts to shift from high professional control to shared responsibility for goals and strategy are already occurring in health care, counseling, personal growth groups, social work, adult learning, higher education, elementary and secondary education, and other fields. These efforts could be strengthened and expanded.

As policymakers, practitioners, student professionals-in-training, and their instructors explore these seven directions, they will enable people to choose even more appropriate changes than they do now, and to achieve them even more efficiently and successfully.

Implications for Research

Several research directions, too, can contribute to improvement in intentional changes. As our understanding of these changes increases, our help and resources and other efforts will become more useful. Four research directions seem to me especially significant.

1. It would be useful and fascinating to study the place of intentional changes in all of the person's changes over the years. What percentage of all change is intentional? How beneficial and stressful are intentional changes compared to unintentional changes? In what ways do highly intentional changers differ from those whose changes are largely unintentional?

2. The data collected for this book give us a reasonably good picture of intentional changes. Now several additional surveys are

needed to study intentional changes in other countries or regions, in specific subcultures and occupational groups, and in particular areas of life. As the results of these further surveys become available, the picture will become more detailed and accurate.

3. During face-to-face interaction between a helper and another person, a variety of factors and forces, both inner and outer, sometimes contribute to helper overcontrol and to the person's passive submission. A few insightful, sensitive, thoughtful researchers could probably illuminate this complex and subtle interaction.

4. In the previous section, and in chapters 5 and 6, I have spelled out seven useful directions for facilitating intentional changes. Just how beneficial would each of these be for changers? Would some other direction be even more beneficial? What really are the unmet needs: from what additional help and competence would people especially benefit? As one step toward answering these questions, researchers might study the process that already occurs, including the tasks performed by the person and the help obtained with these tasks. They might also usefully study the person's difficulties, mistakes, doubts, inaccurate beliefs, and obstacles.

Achieving the Full Potential

In North America and England, and presumably in other regions as well, most men and women choose and successfully achieve beneficial changes. They do this largely on their own, with some help from friends and family. If through some magic telescope one could observe this activity over the entire planet, one would be struck by how common and widespread it is, by the amount of time and personal energy devoted to it, and by its positive impact on human happiness and well-being.

Suppose a second magic telescope could be focused on the planet's total professional and institutional helping enterprise. We would see counselors, therapists, doctors, self-help books and magazines, classrooms, hospitals, workshops, conferences, professionally led groups, staff development departments, clinics, universities, schools, educational television and radio, cassettes, religious services, private lessons, social work agencies, agricultural and homemaking extension programs, correspondence courses, and so on.

Absorbed by observing these two huge and significant enterprises, we might begin to wonder how much they coincide. Are the

two images coterminous? Are the two activities vitally linked? Do they nourish and encourage each other? Do they provide mutual aid?

I am struck by how separate and distant the two enterprises are at present. Even in intensive probing interviews, people report remarkably little help from professional helpers. People simply do not seek help from professionals with the bulk of their changes. At the same time, some professionals seem oblivious to, or ignorant of, the person's natural process of choosing and achieving a wide range of intentional changes. In their worst moments, a few professionals actually denigrate, discourage, undercut, or attack self-guided changes.

In the last few chapters I have been suggesting some relatively unexplored ways in which the professional and institutional helping enterprise could become more useful to the entire range of intentional human changes. I see enormous potential for each of these two activities to contribute much more to the other. As we continue to watch the two activities around the globe through our two magic telescopes, possibly we will see them become more closely linked and intertwined, providing mutual support and help to each other, synergistically achieving their full potential.

Not so many years ago, humankind found that it is not at the center of the physical universe, nor even of the solar system. The universe certainly does not revolve around us. We are not even at the center of our own galaxy, but are located somewhat insignificantly toward the edge of it.

For a moment, let us compare our galaxy with the entire range of intentional human changes: each of the billions of stars could represent one person's changes. The professional helping enterprise often assumes it is at the center of this galaxy: a few changes may occur without professional help, but they are peripheral and insignificant. A few professionals make an even more extreme assumption: they fail to realize that any intentional changes at all occur beyond those that are professionally guided.

As we explore the galaxy of intentional changes, we professionals discover that we are not as important and central as we thought we were. Not all intentional changes revolve around us; in fact, we are not even present in most changes. The central phenomenon in the galaxy of intentional changes turns out to be not professional help, but the person's own planning and process along with help from friends and family. Let's venture forth from our professional base and assumptions to explore the rest of the galaxy. Let's study

the fascinating context within which our helping efforts occur. Let's immerse ourselves in the person's natural process of self-guided change and see how intentional changes actually occur in most people. Then we will be much better able to foster and facilitate this significant human activity.

By focusing on the entire range of major intentional changes, many institutions and professional fields may be united by this common focus. A fresh comprehensive or umbrella field may emerge.

A small pioneering group or network of like-minded persons in the 1980s might grow into a professional association in the 1990s. Such an association could spark workshops, conferences, and newsletters. Professional helpers might become committed to fostering the entire range of changes and feel a kinship with the total helping enterprise. Although loyal to their own particular professions (counseling, education, humanistic psychology, public health, and a dozen others), practitioners might also be interested in the interaction, cooperation, and kinship provided by an umbrella association for everyone involved in facilitating major intentional change in people aged 10 to 100.

Practitioners and researchers from various fields and movements can learn a great deal—about successful practices and past errors, for instance—from other fields. If the thousands and thousands of people employed in facilitating change were to join together, their power could be enormous. As I once said at a professional meeting, "Compared to the total population of the United States and the world, each movement is rather small. Useful interaction might produce far greater impact than continuing to be separated by a rarely crossed chasm" (Tough, 1972, p. 336).

A comprehensive field of research and theory-building, too, may eventually coalesce, focusing on the total range of intentional changes. A research journal, research and development centers, university courses, even an entire graduate department might be established.

More beneficial and efficient changes will result from these various innovations in practice, policy, and research. People will notice and treasure their own intentional changes, and will accurately see their thoughtfulness and success. They will choose changes that are highly beneficial to the well-being and happiness of themselves and others. They will be able to choose from a wide panorama of methods and resources for achieving their chosen changes, and will have ready access to full accurate information about these options. They

will seek and receive highly effective professional help whenever needed, along with support and help from family and friends. They will cheerfully proceed to implement their changes with ease and grace. They will know deeply through experience that choosing and creating significant changes in oneself and one's life is a particularly fascinating and important human enterprise.