**Change is Mandatory... Stress is optional.**

Many years ago, I was promoted beyond my abilities from call-taker to national leader over thirty-eight call centers nationwide in just three years. I don't tell you that to impress you (alright, maybe just a little bit). But beyond my humble-bragging is a message about change and stress. Mercifully, I'll save the personal details of my seemingly meteoric rise, which was in truth largely due to my boss’s mistakes, for another article, and stick to the core of what caused it.

I think if we're going to talk about change, and the stress that too often comes along with it, we have to start with a seemingly ridiculous question: what is the real benefit of staying stuck? You're thinking, "wait a second, Garrison, obviously there is no benefit!” But people rarely do anything without some kind of reason. That is squarely where psychology meets anthropology. The truth is, if you are loyally committed to staying stuck, you probably have a very good reason - and all or part of that rationale is likely avoiding stress. Now consider this - the problem with avoiding “stress” at any cost is that it doesn't really exist. I'm sure there are a lot of freaked-out, sweaty people who will disagree, but hear me out and towel off!

As bad as it might feel, stress is not a condition. It does not float down on you, or enter your bloodstream. Stress is just a belief you hold that makes you worried. How is it that we're hospitalized because the new computer program at work was too complicated, yet we jump out of airplanes for fun? Stress is not based on what's happening - it arises from our *opinion* of what's happening. It's why one person chooses death over public speaking, and someone else enjoys telling their story in front of five thousand people naked (that's the speaker being naked and not the audience, FYI). But if I want to avoid the feelings of stress and anxiety, how can I change easily and effectively?

Well, first it’s important to do a little fact stacking. Generally, when the pain of what we're going through becomes greater than the fear of change, we change quickly - and sometimes not one moment before that. So humans would seem to be very much built for change. But stress often affects us like an allergic reaction to not taking action.  
Though it's true that the perfect is the enemy of the good (which explains why continuous software upgrades always make things more complicated, and sometimes better), it takes willingness to make change happen. But what is willingness and how do you create that in yourself?

According to Chat GPT 3.5, "Willingness implies a positive attitude and sense of cooperation or receptiveness towards fulfilling a request, undertaking a task, or embracing an opportunity" (at this point, I had realized I was quoting a robot, which in fact, actually caused me to be bored by my own article. But this boring, bombastic bot does have a point). A foundational level of for-real positivity and receptiveness is the key. I think willingness brings together three major components: understanding, belief, and trust.

**Understanding:** Gaining a super clear grasp of the benefits and consequences of your course of action can dramatically increase your desire to pursue it.

**Belief:** Having one hundred percent buy-in on what you’re being asked to do can develop the desire to take action. Your belief system creates your experience.

**Trust:** We typically trust things and people we like and understand. That creates a sense of faith. We're more likely to take action when we have faith in something or someone.

For 85% of readers, I believe these points are obvious (no offence to the other 15% of readers). However, I had to say all that to say this. Rather than using 75,000 words to define the term "grit," I'll use my willingness to offend the author of that book to make my point. We do what we believe in the moment is worth doing - worth it for us and worth it to others.

We stay stuck because it can feel like the better benefit to get the sympathy, empathy, and emotional comfort of being a victim than to deal with the difficulty of making adjustments that might be very uncomfortable. That includes staying stuck for the benefit of others. Some people can't become or stay successful because it separates them from the unsuccessful friends they've had all their lives - friends who became distant as they improved their circumstances. They value the connection and approval of those people more than they do moving forward in their own life. The forty-five days of pain that will give us a lifetime of reward brings on too much anxiety for many to consider fighting through them an option. The too often quoted "no pain, no gain” rings true - but if you don't really value the gain enough, even just a little pain punches far above its weight.

Someone who was clearly plagiarizing someone else recently said "the only people who really embrace change are babies with wet diapers!" That quote, which is as marginally clever as it is disgusting, is true in promoting the idea that people who say they really love change are either liars or are likely not very good at what they're doing now! But as mandatory as the change may be the stress is pretty optional. We are really born with only two actual fears: [falling and loud sounds](https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-blog/2018/october/inside-fear-and-its-disorders). The rest of our fears and worries are learned. Historically, the majority of change happens rather quietly and without faceplanting into the ground!

Our two biggest learned fears are often losing what we have and not getting what we want. Naturally, if you really don't like what you have, it's worth the risk to go after what you actually want. Because not only is the true definition of treading water simply delayed drowning, it also attracts sharks. Not moving towards the future can manifest the consequences of a stagnant present and invite those who would consciously or unconsciously drag you down. And weirdly, once you get going, it seems to take a lot more effort to stay stationary than it does to swim forward. It's the difference between the calm, cool, and dignified backstroke and the embarrassing, laborious struggle of the dog paddle. Action and adaptability create opportunity – so keep moving forward and stay flexible along the way to your goals.

Change is not an epiphany, or an “aha!” moment, or a better idea. It's about prioritizing and doing the right things that will get you where you want to go. And as anxious as those first steps may make you, the leading cause of stress is knowing exactly what you're supposed to be doing and consistently doing something else. When you're doing what you know is important, stress feels optional and change feels inevitable.

Personally, I was able to transition the same abilities that gave me superb phone skills into the influence necessary to lead, but it required changing my belief systems in order to not be derailed by fear. I learned that change and the innovation that it drives is the foundation of progress. If it wasn’t, we would still be riding horses wearing pantie hose (again, to be clear, that is us in pantie hose - not the horses).

My journey from call-taker to decision-maker was fueled by the belief that courage, as we define it, is a myth. Courage is not being unafraid, but the simple (not easy) step of taking action in spite of your fears. And it wasn't about brilliance. I discovered that the geniuses always work for the action-takers. But it did require getting real about change.

My point is that progress is not made by trying to develop bravery. It’s created by those willing to take action while they are afraid. Heroes and cowards feel the same fear, it’s the action they take that separates them.