

## Chapter 1

# Focusing on Intentional Changes

Intentional changes are fascinating and important. Men and women bring about remarkable changes in themselves and their lives. They develop self-awareness, become physically fit, change a personal relationship, move to a new job, or grow spiritually. They increase their understanding of human nature, ecology, current events, or the universe. They change their home or lifestyle, begin a new recreational activity or volunteer activity, add a child to their family, or break a destructive habit or addiction.

To achieve these changes, people choose a wide variety of paths and methods along with a great diversity of helpers and books. Many persons are remarkably successful at achieving their chosen changes and proceed largely without professional help. Their own natural process of intentional change is highly effective, and they obtain help from friends and relatives. Some changes, however, do rely on help from a professional person, such as a counselor, teacher, group leader, doctor, therapist, religious leader, training and development specialist, or social worker.

Sometimes the decision to change requires a great deal of effort and time. Should I get married or shouldn't I? Should we have a third child? Will a new job really be better than my present one? Is the thrill of skydiving worth the costs and risks? Sometimes the

steps to achieve the change require a great deal of effort or will-power. Breaking a habit, learning a complex skill, becoming a marathon runner, and understanding current political and economic affairs are examples. In some intentional changes, though, both the choice and the steps are quick and easy.

### A Precise Focus

This book focuses exclusively on highly intentional changes. Many other changes occur too, of course, but I have found it very useful to focus specifically on changes that are highly intentional. In such changes the person clearly chooses the particular change and then takes one or more steps to achieve it.

In interviews in several parts of the United States, Canada, and England, we asked women and men to tell us about their largest, most important intentional change during the past two years. We focused on the portion of the originally chosen change that had, in fact, been achieved: we wanted to study their largest actual change, not their largest intention!

We excluded changes that were desired or chosen but not achieved, such as an unsuccessful effort to switch jobs. We excluded a thoughtful decision to *not* change, such as a person's decision to continue in the present job after receiving an attractive job offer elsewhere.

During the early interviews I wrestled with the question of just how intentional the changes had to be in order to be included. In order to focus on the most useful phenomenon to understand and facilitate, I have adopted a tough stand on just how intentional the change must be. It has to be *highly* intentional, not just somewhat or fairly intentional. Let us turn now to the details of just how intentional a change must be in order to be included in our interviews and in this book.

To be considered sufficiently intentional, a change must have two major characteristics. First, the change must be definitely chosen and intended. That is, the person clearly makes a decision to change in a particular direction. Second, the person then takes one or more steps to achieve the change. The person does something specific, rather than passively letting the change occur with no effort at all. Choosing and striving are the two key elements: the person chooses a particular change and then takes action to achieve it. We exclude changes that do not involve both a clear choice and

some specific efforts or steps. To make these two elements clearer in our interviews, they were displayed in a diagram (sheet #1 in the Appendix).

At the time it is chosen, the desired change may be fairly broad in the person's mind rather than perceived narrowly or in great detail. Such a change is sufficiently intentional if the broad area of change is definitely in the person's mind. For instance, a person may anticipate only the broad general type of change, not the detailed specific changes, when choosing a powerful path, such as psychotherapy, a spiritual quest, an insight-producing drug, or an assignment abroad.

For example, I once decided to travel alone to India to teach at the University of Rajasthan for two months. My decision was motivated by a fairly broad desire to learn about India in general: at that stage I did not have in mind any particular aspects that I wanted to learn about. Soon after I arrived, however, the impact of the poverty all around me was so great that I focused my learning efforts on certain particular aspects, such as the causes of poverty in less developed nations and the steps required for economic development. I count this as an intentional change because it clearly fits within my initial broad goal of learning about India.

The other major impact of my two months abroad was a sharp awareness of the importance to me of my family. I do not count this as intentional because I had not anticipated it nor chosen it. The decision to travel to India was intentional, of course, and I knew that such a powerful experience might produce unexpected sorts of changes. I count a change as intentional, however, only if the person expects and definitely seeks the approximate sort of change that does occur.

When I say that the person must choose the change, I am referring to a conscious choice and intention of which the person is clearly aware. I agree with the notion that, at a level below our awareness, we sometimes choose or intend an apparently accidental or chance event. Poor health, a miraculous cure, or being victimized, for example, may be "chosen" and sought by the person at a subconscious level. This phenomenon has been described by Schutz (1979) in his chapter on "Choice." Although I recognize the importance of these changes, I do not include them in this book.

Also, I include only changes that are primarily chosen *voluntarily*. That is, the "choice" is not largely forced on the person or virtually required by the circumstances. The person is not primarily

coerced into making the change. It is not required in order to avoid some immediate consequence that the person perceives as a disaster, such as being fired, divorced, or killed. If a boss threatens to fire a secretary unless daily output increases, if a spouse threatens divorce unless the couple tries to conceive a child, if a person's salary is cut in half because of the employer's financial situation, then I would call the resulting changes forced and coerced, not voluntary and highly intentional.

Our focus also excludes intentional *responses* to an unintended event that reduces rather than increases the person's options. For instance, a man may be fired, his spouse may die, or he may develop a life-threatening illness. After this sudden unintended traumatic event occurs, the man may have some choice of how to react to that change. He may even choose a very courageous, unexpected, unusual, fresh course of action. He may obtain a job in another field, marry a quite different sort of woman, or become a marathon runner. I do not see these as highly intentional changes: each is simply an intentional *response* to an unintentional change. In each example, the man did not make the initial decision of whether to change: he merely chose one option from those remaining.

### **Benefits from Focusing on Intentional Changes**

It would be foolish for me to claim that only intentional changes are important. They are important, of course, but so are unplanned external events, deliberate influence from others, maturation, and changes at the subconscious level. For instance, I am highly aware of the powerful effects of newspapers, magazines, and TV on my views and values. Also, in the past few years I have become impressed by the powerful impact of my ongoing subconscious stream of events, feelings, dreams, and conflicts. I try to be aware of what is happening in this rushing underground stream, but can do little to control it. From reading and from a few personal experiences, I also recognize that there are certain situations in which it is sometimes valuable to let go, to cease all intending and striving; some examples are a trance state, a mystical or cosmic union experience, and certain moments in athletics.

All in all, then, I would never deny the power and significance of unintentional changes. At the same time, I do claim that professional helpers and researchers can gain important benefits from focusing specifically on intentional changes.

Many occupations and professional fields foster and facilitate intentional changes. Examples are management development, counseling, therapy, human growth groups, lifelong learning and adult education, professional development, career and life planning, humanistic psychology, secondary schools, higher education, health professionals, social work, rehabilitation, staff development, supervision, performance appraisal, behavioral self-management, libraries, religious and spiritual leaders, and transpersonal psychology. The entire range of intentional changes may provide a useful context within which to view your own particular helping efforts. Also, a better understanding of the person's natural ongoing process of intentional change will lead to greater effectiveness as a helper. Obviously, too, we can be far more helpful in the person's process of choosing and planning *intentional* changes than we can be with unintentional changes. People are unlikely to seek our help with their accidental changes, but may welcome better help with their voluntarily chosen changes.

Research and theory, too, could probably benefit from this fresh and comprehensive focus. The total range of intentional changes is an appropriate, useful, powerful focus for both research and theory-building. Our fundamental understanding of human behavior may be enhanced through studies of intentional changes. Such changes are at least as common and significant as unintentional changes, as chapter 3 will demonstrate.

In *The One Quest*, the widely known psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo has attempted to integrate the apparently diverse paths for change that people choose within education, psychotherapy, and religion. He stated that "if we examine closely the nature of the separate quests for growth, sanity, and enlightenment we may discover enough of a meeting ground among them to warrant the ambition of a unified science and art of human change" (1972, p. 30). Surely the appropriate time has arrived for many researchers to move ahead in developing a unified science of intentional human change.

Finally, you may have a personal as well as professional interest in intentional changes. They are fascinating to explore and are often discussed. For instance, successful and unsuccessful efforts to change one's job, relationships, habits, body, or home are common topics of conversation.

A second personal benefit arises because we often provide help to a friend, neighbor, or relative in addition to providing profes-

sional help to our students, clients, or patients. Each of us is, remarkably often, part of the social environment to which someone turns for help with an effort to change. By understanding the natural process of intentional changes, we may become even more thoughtful and effective as helpers.

A third personal benefit concerns our own changes. Each of us must decide quite often whether or what to change, and how to do so. We may choose and achieve our changes more effectively after we gain greater insight into intentional changes in general. My impression is that most of us, though already reasonably successful in managing our own changes, could become even more thoughtful and competent in this sphere.