



*"Start from Joy is a proven recipe for living a life that matters."*

BETH AND JEFF MCCORD, founders of Your Enneagram Coach

# START FROM

# JOY

Trade Shame, Guilt, and Fear for Lasting Change,  
a Lighter Spirit, and a More Fulfilling Life

NEAL SAMUDRE

CARLY SAMUDRE LPC-MHSP

# Advance Praise for *Start from Joy*

There are no better guides for joy out there than Neal and Carly. As they share their own story with profound simplicity and vulnerability, they highlight a practical approach to emotional wellness. *Start from Joy* is a proven recipe for living a life that matters.

**BETH AND JEFF McCORD**

Founder of Your Enneagram Coach and authors of *More than Your Number*

In our noble attempts to live purposefully, many of us have forgotten how to experience joy. This biblically based, scientifically sound book provides the antidote. Written by two of the most joyful people I know, *Start from Joy* is a book I highly recommend.

**JORDAN RAYNOR**

National bestselling author of *Redeeming Your Time*

Like money and happiness, joy is not something to be approached directly. Rather, it is a byproduct of living well. Here's your guide to living in such a way that joy shows up—every day!

**DAN MILLER**

Author of *48 Days to the Work You Love*

Neal and Carly are two of the most joyful people I've ever met. After reading *Start from Joy*, I finally understand why. Packed with intriguing science, captivating stories, and endless applications, this is the emotional-wellness book written for times like these.

**JEFF BROWN**

Author of *Read to Lead: The Simple Habit That Expands Your Influence and Boosts Your Career* and host of the *Read to Lead* podcast, a four-time Best Business Podcast nominee

Every week I coach individuals who are stuck, frustrated, and hopeless on the road to positive change. Though I give them the strategies to succeed, there's an invisible barrier that barricades greater achievement and fulfillment in their lives. I couldn't put words to this barrier—that is, until now. *Start from Joy* is the book we all need to read if we want to create lasting positive change in the world.

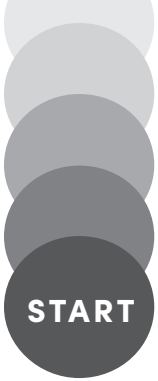
**BRIAN DIXON**

*Author of *Start with Your People**

What a joy! Neal and Carly have given us a gift in this timely reminder of the power of joy to energize positive change in our lives.

**JOSH SPURLOCK, MA, LPC**

Founder of MyCounselor.Online



**START FROM JOY**





NEAL SAMUDRE  
CARLY SAMUDRE LPC-MHSP

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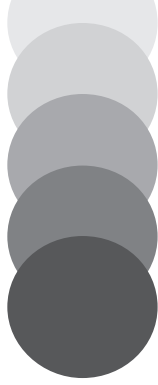
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*To our son, Jude.*

*You are the best teacher of joy.*







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**INTRO**

# **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO START FROM JOY?**

How you start anything matters.

Starting your day at a frantic pace paves the way for greater stress, anxiety, and exhaustion as the day goes on. Starting a road trip with the wrong directions will likely lead to frustration and wasted hours of travel. Starting your workday with the steady drip of news and notifications from your phone will probably lead to less productivity and few results at the end of the day.

The same is true when it comes to our journey to positive change. As we embark on our quests to move our lives forward in meaningful, productive ways, it matters where and how we start. It can determine whether we get to where we want to go.

As professionals dedicated to helping individuals enjoy positive change, we've seen this truth lived out time after time. Moving our lives forward should be a fun and enjoyable experience. Yet people start their journeys from places that sabotage the good they want to

accomplish. Instead of going to the gym for the fun of it, we treat it as a chore—a necessary evil in order to lose weight. Instead of starting new relationships with passion and excitement, our past baggage taints the thrill and poisons the hope of something new. Instead of crafting our own definition of parenting, we fear we'll be repeats of our parents who hurt us, which makes parenting even more difficult. In our work, we help people find a new starting point in their quest for positive change so they can reclaim the joy that leads to lasting, fulfilling results.

No example illustrates the power of starting points more clearly than this tale of two entrepreneurs.

The first entrepreneur was starting a business that should have been a raging success. It was in a booming industry, and he was addressing a clear felt need with his services. Yet he believed that to be a success, he had to keep the chip on his shoulder. He grew up watching big-time entrepreneurs point to a certain pain from their past as the launching pad for their endeavors. He, too, believed that he had to prove the world wrong. All this did was feed his shame of not being enough, his fear of messing up, and his guilt over not being more available for his family. This strategy worked . . . for a while. He was able to bulldoze his way into achieving some results. But the change didn't last. The desire to prove the world wrong turned into patterns of burnout, frustration, and hopelessness. Eventually, his business ended, crippled under the weight of shame, guilt, and fear.

The second entrepreneur had a different starting point. He didn't feel like he had anything to prove. In fact, his future felt full of hope, possibility, and wonder. His business was starting in an industry with various complications and regulations. On top of that, this was an entirely new industry for him. But this didn't deter him. With his energy and excitement, he inspired others to follow his vision, and he was able to build something that's still growing.

While the first entrepreneur started from a place of shame, guilt, and fear, believing his business would prove his worth and rescue him

and his family from poverty, the second entrepreneur started from a place of joy, which led to lasting results. I (Neal) know their stories clearly because they're both mine. I am the entrepreneur who botched his first business, but I'm also the entrepreneur with a company that began the opposite way: from a place of joy.

### THE SPARK FOR LASTING CHANGE

No matter who you are—whatever your relationship status or job title, whatever your financial situation or health condition, whatever your family of origin—we all have at least one area of life we want to change. We all have an area where we feel stuck.

Maybe you want to pay off your credit card debt, or maybe you want more energy throughout the day. Maybe you want to stop yelling at your kids, or maybe you want to stop dating jerks. Maybe you want to get into a regular workout routine, or maybe you want to stop your mind from going into overdrive every time something unexpected happens. We all have parts of our lives we want to change.

Unfortunately, breaking old patterns and pursuing change isn't something that comes naturally for most of us. We repeat familiar pathways, never seeing results, until any hope of change drifts away. Our credit card debt grows bigger. Our energy level wanes. Our kids continue to see the worst of us. Our dating prospects bottom out. Our workout routines turn into Netflix binges. And our minds spin in a cycle of anxiety.

Why is this so often the story for desired change? Why do we end up in a place of burnout, frustration, stress, and anxiety instead of the fulfillment of our dreams? Why does change seem so *hard*?

Many people would say it's an issue of willpower. Self-help gurus—the people who make fortunes from telling us what to do—might say, “You must not want it bad enough.” But something about that doesn't ring true. You know more than anyone else how desperately you want to change.

Others would reduce positive change to a math problem. They might say you need to examine the components of your day to find the perfect formula for success. But you know it's not that simple. You've tried all the systems and methods for lasting change, and you're still here.

So if change isn't brought about by willpower or a magic bullet, what is it prompted by? Based on our years of professional experience and more than half a decade of study, we've landed on a simple conclusion: positive change is sparked by joy.

Not "Try harder." Not "Put your nose to the grindstone." Not "You should be ashamed of yourself." Not "Do it or else." Not "You should be past this by now." *Joy.*

Nothing is more motivating than our emotions, whether positive or negative. Emotions move us. Think about the biggest decisions you've made in your life—maybe it's going to a certain school or getting married or following a particular career path. Those decisions aren't just motivated by reason, right? They're also fueled by powerful feelings.

Yet we often ignore the role of emotions in building the life we want. While focusing on changing our thoughts and actions, we mistakenly lean on disempowering emotions like shame, guilt, and fear to create change. Most of the time we don't even realize we're doing it. But the white noise in our brains is constantly going something like this: *You're not good enough. You missed the mark again. You have to do better next time. That was stupid. What will happen if you don't get this right? You're so [insert shaming word here] for doing this again.*

But while negative emotions might prompt temporary change, after a while we'll slip back into our old patterns. Negative emotions are energy drainers that siphon the life out of sustainable change. The more we keep them around, the more we burn out and default to what we've done before.

There's only one emotion that will motivate lasting change and a more fulfilling life. This emotion is *joy*.

## WHAT IS JOY?

Maybe when you hear the word *joy*, you imagine something cheesy and unconnected to real life, like a Disney movie or your gospel-singing aunt Sally. Or you might think joy is impossible and elusive in this season of your life. But the kind of joy we're talking about isn't dependent on your circumstances or your personality or your tendency to break into song at any given moment.

Instead, joy is a deep internal gladness inspired by hope, purpose, and delight. While happiness is based on our circumstances, joy is something we experience on an internal level. To reach for greater happiness, we have to change the hard parts of our lives. But joy is available at all times, regardless of whether we change our situation.

When we live from a place of joy, we don't *have to* change; we *get to* change.


This distinction makes all the difference when it comes to the hard parts of our lives. Instead of carrying the heavy weight of shame, guilt, and fear in the quest to change, we can live with joy regardless of whether we achieve the results we're hoping for. And it's precisely from this place that we can make changes that last.

## WHICH COMES FIRST: CHANGE OR JOY?

This idea of starting from joy might sound simple, but there's one problem: many of us believe joy is the *result* of positive change, not the cause of it. We think that once we lose those pesky ten pounds, we'll be happy. Once we're out of debt, we'll be happy. Once we have a fulfilling job, we'll be happy. Once we're married, we'll be happy.

I (Neal) once bought into this mistaken idea. I believed that happiness was on the other side of painstaking change. If I put in the extra hours at work each day, then I'd be happy. If I shamed myself for not being a good husband, then I would change and be happier. If I was disciplined with my workouts, then I would find happiness. I thought that change came before joy—that I had to make change happen to finally enjoy life.





**When we live  
from a place of joy,  
we don't *have* to change;  
we *get* to change.**

I know I'm not alone in this thinking. In a culture of self-improvement, we assume that the way to build an enjoyable life is to measure up, do more, try harder, run uphill, and white-knuckle our way through change. We've bought into the idea that change should be hard and painful, but that it's the only way to one day arrive at joy.

So we put ourselves to work.

We count calories and force ourselves to go to the gym, believing that thin equals happy.

We drag our feet to the office, believing we'll be happy once we get the promotion.

We deprive ourselves of entertainment, believing that we don't deserve to have fun until we've paid off that overwhelming debt.

We believe that joy is only possible on the other side of immense pain. We think that one day we'll have an enjoyable life, but only after putting ourselves through the work of difficult change. We've been sold the narrative that joy is a destination. If we stay the course and don't slip up, we'll "arrive."

This approach is sabotaging us. The reality is, we can't pursue positive change from a negative space.

Of course, it's true that we can hustle our way to results for a time. But as we crack the whip harder to achieve, we ignore the needs of our bodies. This is not sustainable, and eventually we will crumble under the weight. Negativity produces more negativity, and our efforts at change will eventually implode.

How we begin is how we end. If we force ourselves to change with feelings of shame, guilt, and fear, that's all we end up with. Starting from joy, on the other hand, puts empowering emotions at the center of positive change. This is the key to making change last: recognizing that joy is not the result of change but the cause of it.

Joy → Change

In his book *The Happiness Advantage*, positive psychologist and researcher Shawn Achor explains that success doesn't come before happiness. He says this "work hard for happiness" formula is backward. In reality, he says, it's the other way around.<sup>1</sup> It's only when we start from joy that we can experience lasting positive change and truly enjoy our lives.

## THE PATH TO CHANGE

Starting from joy is not the default for most of us. We're used to motivating ourselves with emotions like shame ("Ugh, I'm so bad for eating that donut"), guilt ("I need to work off what I ate last night in the gym"), or fear ("I need to cut up my credit cards or I will never get out of debt").

We're used to stuffing our emotions at work so we can put up with the pain of going to a joyless job ("I'll be stuck in this dead-end job forever, but it's my duty to my family").

We're used to depriving ourselves of fun and delight in our relationships ("The last thing I want to do is go on a date after a long day at work").

We're used to going through the motions at church and feeling guilty for not praying or reading our Bibles more ("I feel like I'm not spending enough time with God").

We attempt to solve the hard parts of our lives with discipline, rigor, and extreme effort. We double down on a diet or a workout program, we restrict our money, we strive for hyper-productivity at work, we overlook daily moments of connection in pursuit of big dates and vacations, and we make our faith a series of to-dos.

But this mindset often backfires. Heavy restriction leads to bingeing. Doubling down on rules and regulations leads to injuries and exhaustion. Stuffing our emotions leads to eruptions. Sacrificing small, consistent moments of intimacy leaves us emotionally bankrupt. And guilt-based religion denies us a meaningful journey of faith. These

aren't failures of not trying hard enough or not knowing enough; instead, they're the result of unhealthy emotional patterns. We don't arrive at the results we want because we're not feeling the right emotions from the beginning.

The negative emotions of shame, guilt, and fear sabotage the life we want. If we want to enjoy life, change needs to start from joy.

With a start-from-joy approach:

- Your reason to change isn't because you believe the worst about yourself or because you're trying to measure up. This is shame, and it will lead only to self-loathing.
- Your reason to change isn't because you did something "wrong." This is guilt, and while healthy guilt has its place, you will be dissatisfied in your journey if you remain stuck there.
- Your reason to change isn't because you're afraid of what will happen if you don't. This is fear, and while fear can lead to wise action, it will end up paralyzing you if it's calling the shots.

A start-from-joy approach isn't about "should" or "ought to" or "or else." Instead, it's the pathway for change that is fun, meaningful, and hopeful.

## **A FULLER LIFE AHEAD**

When I (Neal) started doing this work myself, I thought, *I can't make change last, but I don't struggle with shame, guilt, or fear. Surely that's not the reason.*

But the truth is, these emotions are subtle, silent saboteurs. We often don't even recognize their role in our decisions and behaviors. We think that critical voice in our head is telling us the truth about ourselves. We assume guilt will lead us to do better next time, but in reality, guilt is not a place to stay. We don't realize we're motivated by fear, yet we're consumed by thoughts about what will happen if we

don't change. Shame, guilt, and fear sneak in and slowly steer us into a negative, hopeless place.

When we start from joy, we choose a different motivation. It's not just a mindset shift; it's a *feeling* shift.

Starting from Shame/Guilt/Fear	Starting from Joy
<p>I meticulously track my calories and exercises because I really need to shed a few pounds in order to feel good about myself.</p>	<p>I can learn to enjoy working out. It doesn't have to feel like a chore. I can celebrate progress and the mental and physical benefits beyond how I look.</p>
<p>I feel guilty because I know I should be reading my Bible more.</p>	<p>I can connect with God in a variety of different ways. And I can enjoy it!</p>
<p>"Savings September" just rolled into "Opt-Out October" and "No-Spend November." Guess I won't be getting together with my friends until the New Year.</p>	<p>It's possible to feel confident and empowered when it comes to money. I feel permission to save and to spend because I have a realistic plan in place.</p>
<p>I have entirely sworn off sugar. I throw away any sweets that come into the house because I'm afraid of what I would do with them.</p>	<p>I feel the freedom to eat a variety of foods without fear of losing control. I view food as something to be savored and enjoyed.</p>
<p>I need to put in extra hours at work or I'll never get the promotion I'm hoping for. Besides, I don't want to let my coworkers down. I have no work-life balance, but this is the only road to success.</p>	<p>I can trust that the work will get done while I honor my limits. Doing my job when I'm well rested and when I have healthy boundaries in place will lead to more positive outcomes, at work and at home.</p>
<p>My spouse and I are pitted "you versus me" on just about every subject. I feel like I'm alone in this marriage, and I'm afraid I will never get the love and respect I deserve.</p>	<p>I trust that my spouse and I can be on the same team rather than act as opponents. We can have difficult conversations to get on the same page, and our relationship will be better for it.</p>

When we start from joy, lasting results follow. We know, because it's been true for the two of us, and it's been true for people we've worked with.

Like our client Nate, who conquered agoraphobia by challenging his fear-driven response.

Or Chelsea, who stopped speaking the worst about herself and found fun and enjoyment in going on dates.

Or Audre, who examined her relationship with exercise and made it a joyful experience instead of something to endure.

Or Violetta, who stopped overspending out of guilt and instead focused on creating meaningful experiences with her daughter.

Or Jordan, who found his dream job once he let go of his shame-inducing beliefs about the type of job he “should” have.

There’s a fuller life ahead of you, one that’s buzzing with joy. If you feel burned out and hopeless about your life ever changing, you don’t have to stay stuck there. And if you don’t feel stressed and frustrated but aren’t experiencing the kind of transformation you’d like, there’s a fuller life in store for you, too. No matter what you’re wrestling with, joy is the secret to lasting positive change.

Carly and I are so passionate about this approach to change that we have poured our lives into helping other people experience it too. For over half a decade, we’ve studied psychology, therapy, neuroscience, and the Bible to develop a therapeutic approach to making lasting change—one that gives you practical shifts to combat disempowering emotions and help you embrace joy instead.

In this book, you’ll learn the seven principles behind this approach and how you can apply them to different areas of your life, including health, money, work, and relationships.

- If you know the healthy choices you should make but struggle to execute them, this book is for you.
- If you start on the path to positive change only to burn out, this book is for you.
- If you repeat old patterns instead of breaking them, this book is for you.

- If you beat yourself up for not making the changes you want to make, this book is for you.
- If you're familiar with failed cycles of dieting, budgeting, and self-control, this book is for you.
- If you're exhausted from continually hustling, doing more, or trying harder, this book is for you.
- If you've read all the books and tried all the methods and you need an approach to change that works in the real world, this book is for you.
- And if you're wondering how your mental and emotional health intersects with your faith, this book is for you.

It's time to flip the script and try a lighter, more freeing approach to change. Instead of reaching for joy by putting yourself through intense change, put your joy first and lasting results will follow.

When you learn to start from joy, you'll end with joy. In doing so, you'll create an enjoyable and fulfilling life—the kind that ripples out into the world and brings heaven down to earth.



**PART ONE**

**The  
Start-from-Joy  
Life**







# 1

## THE GIFTS OF JOY

*Joy is the secret to lasting positive change.*

“You should go to therapy.”

Carly and I were at the tail end of an argument in our kitchen when she dropped this bombshell. We’d been in this argument before: I would feel pressure in my business and want to talk about it with Carly. She would feel helpless and stuck about how to advise me, and I would get mad at her for tuning out. Carly didn’t know of a way to get past this issue besides asking for help.

You’d think being married to a therapist would make me more open to therapy. It didn’t. I had no desire to sit in the office of a stranger and admit something was wrong.

But I also knew she was right. I was unhappy, frustrated, and stuck, and I didn’t know why.

On the surface, I had everything that should have made me happy. I had a successful business, and I’d achieved my goals for the year. I’d tripled my income, and I had a steady flow of clients. I had a wife

who was able to freely explore her passions and callings. I was able to provide for our family. I tried to tell myself those trophies were proof that I didn't need help. But after a few months of pretending nothing was wrong, I finally caved and scheduled an appointment.

As I sat in the waiting room to see a therapist named Myron, I stared at my feet, my phone, and the carpet, trying to prepare myself for what would take place behind that door. Did I mention I wasn't looking forward to therapy? As an entrepreneur, I was accustomed to meeting with business coaches. I looked forward to my meetings with them. They would pump their fists and shout, "We're going to crush our goals!" Those sessions were as thrilling as a rock concert.

Therapists, on the other hand, know how to kill the mood. I was sure I would hear, in the softest tone, "Get ready to do some *hard work*. It's going to be hard . . . so hard. But it'll be worth it." This didn't have me doing somersaults into the therapy room.

But Myron instantly shattered this misconception. When he opened the door in the waiting room to invite me back to his office, his smile caught me off guard. It was a wide, full-teeth smile—the kind a joyful, naive kid would offer. I'd been expecting an old man with narrow eyes that would examine my soul or something. Instead, Myron was full of life. My defenses fell.

I followed Myron through winding hallways and the *whirr* of white-noise machines until we came to his office.

As soon as I sat on the couch, I launched in. "I've achieved all my goals this year and built the business I wanted. So tell me—why am I not happy?"

Myron seemed unfazed by my attempts at impressing him. He proceeded to ask me questions about my childhood, my brothers, and my parents. He drilled down on where I'd learned certain beliefs and how they were playing out in my life.

After seeing him for several sessions, he pointed out the reality that was obvious to him—and was becoming obvious to me, too.

“It seems you’ve lost joy,” Myron said one day.

I had no way of knowing in that moment what a journey those words would spark in me.

### **“WHAT’S WRONG WITH ME?”**

Just down the road from Myron’s office is another therapy office—mine (Carly’s). As a therapist, I’ve met with countless people who have lost their joy—people who are spinning with anxiety, sinking in depression, and feeling more stuck than ever. I started my training by learning about cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and motivation-and-behavior change in addiction. I’d been trained to use motivational interviewing to combat these very issues. But something still felt missing in my understanding of positive change.

People would come to me and say, “Carly, no matter how much I change about my life, I feel like God doesn’t love me. I don’t love myself, and I’m just searching for the next thing to make me happy.”

I knew what they meant. They believed something was barring them from greater joy in their life. But what was it? I put on my detective hat and began to explore what was behind this feeling.

I learned about more practices, including Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). These practices helped me “refile” traumatic memories to where they belong so they have less emotional charge in the here and now. As I brought these modalities into the therapy room, I started to see that the barriers that were blocking people from joy were shame, guilt, and fear, and these emotions were deeply embedded in their personal stories.

I help clients change the question from “What’s wrong with me?” to “What happened to me?” so they can heal the shame, guilt, and fear intertwined with their stories. It takes time and work, but people experience so much joy and freedom when they begin to loosen the chains of hurt and trauma that have held them down for so long.

I didn't realize it at the time, but this work would become the foundation of something Neal and I would build together.

## THE FOUR GIFTS OF JOY

If you had told me (Neal) years ago that I would one day be the CEO of an emotional health-and-wellness company, I wouldn't have believed it. But here I am, years after Myron told me I'd lost joy, running a company that empowers people to find joy in their lives. At our company, Enjoyco, we believe positive change should be a fun, enjoyable experience from the start. We help our clients start from joy so they can create lasting positive change in their lives.

Back in Myron's office, his statement sparked curiosity in me. *Why joy?* I wondered. I began doing research, diving deep into the work of positive psychology, studying people like Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Barbara Fredrickson, and more, and also finding out what the Bible says about joy (God created it, after all).


At the dinner table, I would excitedly tell Carly what I'd learned about joy, and we would geek out together. She had a unique perspective, as she was seeing these principles come alive in the therapy room.

In those early days, we asked ourselves some probing questions:

- Why is joy the key to lasting change?
- Why does joy lead to a fulfilling life?
- Why is it important to cultivate joy at the onset of change?
- Why does change start with joy rather than some other mindset, such as peace?

We knew solving these questions was pivotal to unlocking positive change.

After years of asking ourselves these questions and seeing the principles play out in Carly's therapy room, we identified four gifts that



**Positive change  
should be a fun,  
enjoyable experience  
from the start.**

are unique to joy. These gifts are what make joy the most empowering emotion in creating lasting change.

The four gifts are

- resilience,
- contentment,
- trust,
- and play.

### Resilience

Resilience helps us withstand all the emotions of positive change.

We might think of positive change as being about our actions, but at its core it's really an emotional matter. That's because our actions are ultimately the by-product of how we feel. Most self-help gurus would advise us to put aside our emotions and fight our battle with mental toughness and fortitude. But this advice inevitably ends up being counterproductive. It creates an unhealthy relationship with our emotions, and having a flawed relationship with our emotions will sabotage our efforts to change faster than anything else.

Joy, on the other hand, helps us own the full range of our emotions. In doing so, we become more resilient when experiencing the emotions we don't want to face. It's the fear of "negative" emotions that causes us to sabotage ourselves. If we escape uncomfortable emotions that are essential for growth and change, we bar ourselves from the life we want.

The reality is that the road to positive change sometimes involves hard emotions. Change *is* uncomfortable—even when it's change we want. Joy acknowledges this reality and gives us the resilience to persevere instead of self-sabotage when the going gets tough.

In his book *The Voice of the Heart*, author and counselor Chip Dodd describes eight core emotions: hurt, loneliness, sadness, anger, fear, shame, guilt, and gladness.<sup>1</sup> He argues that when we feel these

emotions in a healthy way, we can experience them as gifts. This means there's a good side to all our emotions.

- Hurt can lead to healing.
- Loneliness can lead to intimacy.
- Sadness can lead to acceptance.
- Anger can lead to passion.
- Fear can lead to wisdom.
- Shame can lead to humility.
- Guilt can lead to forgiveness.
- Gladness can lead to joy. (Hey, look! It's joy!)

Did you notice that all these emotions except gladness sound terrible at first? But Dodd argues that all of them are valuable because each one can lead to a positive outcome. There's a reason gladness and joy are at the bottom of this list, under the "negative" emotions. It's because true joy is possible only when we open ourselves up to feeling the other emotions.

You can't have the fullness of joy without risking the potential for pain.

Think about it this way: when you first learned to walk, you had no idea how it would turn out for you. You stood up on your wobbly two legs, put one foot in front of the other, and then . . . you fell flat on your face. Your parents might have rushed over, but you stood up again. You took another step and face-planted onto the carpet again. You kept repeating this until you experienced success. You learned to walk, but only after experiencing pain.

Carly and I recently became parents of a baby boy. Shortly after he was born, there were times when all I could do was watch him sleep. Other parents told me to "sleep when the baby sleeps," but I couldn't help but stare at my little one with immense love. I experienced so much joy partnering with Carly to bring this child into the world, but



at the same time, I felt so much fear. I didn't want anything to happen to my son.

I wondered how this tiny human could render us so utterly vulnerable. We could have avoided this fear and vulnerability by not having a child, but we also would have missed out on the joy of experiencing this kind of love. Someone once told me that being a parent is like reaching the summit of the highest mountain, only to realize you're scared of heights. Now I know what they meant.

To rise to the heights of joy, we have to risk the possibility of falling.

Brené Brown calls joy the most vulnerable emotion. To experience joy, we have to open ourselves up to the potential of losing it.<sup>2</sup>

Something unexpected happens as we open ourselves to negative emotions: we grow more resilient to them. This resilience makes us stronger, so we persevere in creating lasting change.

## Contentment

Contentment helps us detach from the results of our efforts.

When we're really hoping for something in our life to change, it might sound counterintuitive to want to be less invested in the outcome. But when the results become something we *need* to accomplish, the pressure stifles us and births hard emotions rather than empowering ones.

Donna is one of the most joyful people Neal and I know. But if you heard her story without meeting her, you would assume otherwise.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to ravage the world, Donna was admitted to the hospital. Little was known about this disease at the time, but that didn't shake her. Instead, she had an unwavering peace about her. After several days in the hospital, the doctors advised her to go on a ventilator to give her more breathing capacity. She said no. "Save it for the other patients," she insisted. The nurses and doctors were baffled by her confidence and peace. Soon after, Donna made a miraculous recovery.

Donna's experience gave her newfound purpose. Since her recovery,

she has walked with families who have lost loved ones to COVID-19. The same confidence and peace the doctors and nurses observed when she faced her own health crisis is now helping other families heal.

This internal peace, one of the gifts of joy, is none other than contentment. It's being okay when everything around us is not okay. Contentment isn't about forcing happiness or pasting a fake smile on our face in hard situations. It's drawing strength from a place of steadfast hope. While the world around us may break, our internal world is unshakable.

When we feel frazzled by our circumstances, the temptation is to try to change those circumstances. We think the path to being okay internally will come when we change our external reality. But contentment doesn't depend on what's happening in our lives. This is how Paul in the Bible was able to have joy while he was in prison. He wasn't trying to force his way to freedom. He didn't need to change his situation to find satisfaction. He had the kind of contentment that allowed him to rejoice even though his circumstances were far from ideal.<sup>3</sup>

If our joy isn't dependent on a change in our situation, we don't have to be held hostage by something outside our control. Contentment allows us to have a lightness of spirit and frees us from the pressure of trying so hard to control the outcome. And this in turn helps us create lasting change.

Have you ever felt that the harder you try, the harder it is to change? That's because the gap between where we are now and where we want to be gives birth to shame, guilt, and fear. This makes change feel more difficult, which then prompts us to try harder until we burn out. It's a vicious cycle.

On the flip side, have you ever felt like you were able to change parts of your life you weren't really trying to change? It almost feels unfair, doesn't it? The same principle applies. When we have less stock in getting results, we feel less pressure. And with less pressure, there's less shame, guilt, and fear.

If we can be okay and have peace no matter the results, we can set ourselves free from the pressure of trying so hard.

## Trust

Trust helps us build the confidence and hope we need to make changes.

Whether we realize it or not, we all put our trust in something. When it comes to change, we are told to trust the guidance of self-improvement programs if we want to achieve results. We are fed promises like “Follow these ten steps for guaranteed results” or “Lose ten pounds with our workout regimen” or “Follow this simple three-step solution to financial freedom.” These programs assure us that if we do exactly as they say, change is in our future. But Neal and I see this strategy backfire all the time, because this kind of change simply isn’t sustainable.

My (Carly’s) client Ariel is a good example. She only knew how to feed herself healthy foods if she was following a diet. She wasn’t attuned enough to her body to know what to eat without external guidance. Her lack of trust in herself led her to yo-yo dieting and chasing program after program to achieve short-lived results.

Now, I’m not against self-improvement programs—I’ve been through plenty myself. But we have to realize that these programs end up corroding our ability to trust ourselves.

Joy, on the other hand, gives us the gift of being able to trust ourselves.

You can trust yourself to know what your body needs for fuel and care.

You can trust yourself to know what to do with your money.

You can trust yourself to know what you need in a relationship.

Yes, you might need to learn some skills or mindset shifts, but ultimately you know yourself and what you need better than any plan does. If we fear what would happen if we went off the program, then the program is not giving us true hope. We experience real hope for

change when we believe we know what's best for us and how to take care of ourselves.

In her book *Emotional Agility*, Dr. Susan David says, “To make decisions that match up with the way you hope to live going forward, you have to be in touch with the things that matter to you so you can use them as signposts.”<sup>4</sup> Here's the problem: what matters to us gets drowned out by the noise of what our culture, our family, and our friends say is important, cool, and right. We end up forfeiting trust in our bodies and our values.

This isn't to say that we should only trust ourselves. We can and should trust external guides and mentors, too—but only after we've filtered our decisions through our values. Without careful consideration, we will allow our sails to be blown in the direction of the strongest wind, which doesn't always lead us to the destination we intended.

God promises to give us wisdom directly. James 1:5 says, “If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you” (NLT). That means we can trust him to lead us—through his Word, through his Spirit, and through wise mentors and friends. We don't have to out-source our decision-making to a program or to someone else's values.

What we've learned from our research is that happiness is based on circumstances, while joy stems from something internal. We don't find joy from listening to all the external sources telling us what should matter to us. Joy helps us trust what we know is true so we can build the life we hope for.

## Play

Play helps us stick to positive change.

Research in neuroscience, psychology, and human behavior all indicate that we repeat behaviors we find pleasurable. God designed us this way to ensure our survival. If we didn't enjoy eating food, being in relationships, experiencing intimacy, and more, we would fail to thrive as the human race.

If we stick to the things we enjoy, it makes sense that joy must come before positive change. Any change we want to make in life won't last if joy isn't present.

The other day my (Neal's) friend James told me he bought a house that was in a higher price range than his original goal. In the past, such a decision would have been paralyzing for him. Because of past financial trauma, his feelings about money were tied up with a lot of fear. But this time, while he was taking the decision seriously, he was at peace about it.

When I asked him what was different this time, he said, "I finally felt safe to play with my money. I had been making wise moves to heal my emotional relationship with finances, and I knew this purchase wouldn't destroy us. So I decided to make a move that would pay dividends in our joy and happiness, even if it didn't make complete rational sense."

James was learning one of the keys to a start-from-joy approach. Play allows us to take risks and make investments in our own happiness. Change isn't about sitting in the heaviness of life and staying steeped in negativity. We need moments of play if we want to stick to positive change. If James hadn't taken any risks with his money, he would have remained stuck in fear. As he learns to enjoy his money, he'll continue to make positive, lasting changes in this area.

Joy naturally helps us stick to positive choices for our lives. When joy is missing from our efforts to change, it leads us to burnout. It's like swimming upstream or sailing a ship against the wind—we can do it for a while, but soon enough, we'll exhaust ourselves. When we add play to our quest for positive change, we create lasting results.



The four gifts of joy—resilience, contentment, trust, and play—help us stick to positive change for the long haul.

- Without the resilience of joy, we bend and ultimately break with the uncomfortable emotions surrounding change.
- Without the contentment of joy, we keep hustling and trying harder but never achieve internal satisfaction.
- Without the trust of joy, we jump from program to program without fostering the attunement that leads to lasting change.
- And without the play of joy, we never risk, grow, or enjoy the change we're seeking.

These gifts are what make joy the most empowering emotion for our positive-change journey. So how can we cultivate this joy, starting today, regardless of whether anything has changed in our lives? How can we begin to implement a start-from-joy approach?

## **A NEW APPROACH TO CHANGE**

In our culture of self-improvement, we're constantly told to do more, learn more, try a five-step formula, or search for the new program that will help us achieve results. Yet all these "solutions" focus on what happens with our hands and heads, while ignoring matters of the heart, where we find the key to lasting change.

Years before Myron told me (Neal) that I had lost joy, I was a wide-eyed young marketer who was just starting my first business. One of my early marketing clients was a fascinating older gentleman named Robert. Robert was the director of the longest study of adult life and happiness at Harvard. He and his team tracked the lives of 724 men for more than 75 years. They also studied the sons and daughters of these men. In their study, they discovered what makes for a meaningful life. The answer was simple: good relationships keep us happier and healthier.

Robert shared these findings in a TEDx talk in Boston, and I was backstage eagerly listening as he revealed his findings to the world.

I was familiar with his study because I'd combed through his speech

to work on his marketing. As I listened to him from the greenroom, each of his points hit my ears like beats in a pop song. When the talk ended, there was a roar of applause.

Robert's talk ended up becoming one of the most-viewed TED talks in the world. The large-scale interest in this topic revealed something obvious: people want to feel happy.

This simple revelation has profound implications for positive change. We pursue change to feel happiness and joy. Whatever we're trying to achieve—whether it's getting out of debt, deepening our relationships, or growing in our faith—we're pursuing the goal because we believe there's greater happiness on the other side. Yet happiness is an emotional matter. We can't ignore the heart if we want to achieve the desires of the heart.

Chip Dodd puts it this way: "We are people with heart pains and heart problems which require heart solutions. However, we attempt to solve heart problems with intellect, willpower, and morality, which are no more effective for solving heart problems than a shovel is for cutting a board."<sup>5</sup>

Maybe you feel desperate to change and frustrated that you haven't been able to break your patterns. Maybe you've tried everything, and nothing has worked. If so, it's time to try a different approach—one that leads with the heart. Instead of burying your emotions in the journey toward change, bring them to the center. Instead of putting yourself through more pain, try a lighter approach. Instead of forfeiting joy now for joy in the future, cultivate joy in the present, without the pressure to change anything.

The start-from-joy approach is built on seven principles. They are:

End the motivation of shame, guilt, and fear.

Be curious with your emotions.

Interrupt your loops.

Challenge false scripts.

Call out the Judge.  
Find your Joyful Purpose.  
Make it fun.

This is not a step-by-step program, nor is it a formula for guaranteed success. Rather, these are shifts to help you end the toxic influence of disempowering emotions on your journey toward change. This is a way to end the hustle and prioritize joy instead.

There's no specific order for these principles either—you can jump in anyplace that resonates with you during a specific season.

If you constantly invalidate your emotions on the journey to change, you can learn the valuable skill of being curious with them. If you have trouble stopping your self-sabotaging patterns and shame yourself for them, you can focus on interrupting these loops. And if you feel like change simply isn't fun, you can make it fun. These principles are interrelated, dancing with one another to help you achieve the change that connects with what you need right now.

In part 1 of this book, you'll learn about each of these principles and how to shift your feelings and thoughts in this direction. You don't have to try them all, though being open to all of them will give you the best chance for creating change. Even if you apply just one of these principles, you'll be on the way to building lasting change, creating a lighter spirit, and living a more fulfilling life.

In part 2, you'll discover how these principles work in some of the hardest areas to change. You'll find out how a start-from-joy perspective can help you stop the cycle of self-sabotage and achieve lasting results when it comes to health, money, work, and relationships.

If you've tried it all and still find yourself stuck, it's time to try something new. It's time to start from joy.