

Why Some People Change Their Lives But Others Stay Stuck

by [Dr. David B. Feldman](#) August 15, 2014 5:09 AM

Asha Mevlana faced a difficult choice. The decision she made ultimately would help her to rise to rock stardom, playing electric violin with some of today's top bands. But, as we discovered when we interviewed her for [our book](#), there was much more to that choice than meets the eye. In fact, Asha got us thinking about how people go about choosing to change their lives, and why many people so easily stay stuck in lives they're not happy with.

Asha had been a successful marketing executive in New York when she was diagnosed with a particularly virulent form of breast cancer at age 25. Ultimately, treatment was successful, placing her cancer into remission. But, emerging from this crisis, she was faced with an unexpected decision to make, one that she says was every bit as challenging as enduring chemotherapy and radiation.

She noticed that something within her had changed. While she'd been wondering whether she would die, everyone else had gone on blithely living their lives. Her co-workers complained about the crummy New York weather and the long lines at Starbucks. The life she had fought so hard to retain felt strangely empty.

Yes, her career earned her a good living, one that allowed her to afford her far-too-expensive apartment in SoHo. But she now realized that it had never been all that meaningful. Asha began to wonder whether she should quit that job and do something different.

In the midst of her cancer treatment, Asha began taking improvisational violin lessons. She hadn't picked up the instrument since middle school, when the thought of making a living in music had never occurred to her. But now, after working hard for many months, she ended up playing electric violin for a few amateur rock bands.

Something about this new life clicked. Perhaps it was the unscripted nature that, much like the music itself, was creative and freeing. A couple months later, when a friend invited her to visit Los Angeles for a weekend, she met a number of local musicians who convinced her she could get paying gigs in California.

Should she move? Many people would say that such a choice would be foolhardy. But, in the end, which path would lead her to a life with the fewest regrets? It's a kind of choice that is probably familiar to most of us.

Being free to choose is wonderful. Though there's still much societal progress to be made, it's good that more people in the early 21st century than at any other time in history enjoy the freedom and means to pursue the kind of life that's right for them. As Swarthmore College psychologist Barry Schwartz wrote in a [2000 article in American Psychologist](#), "I think it is only a slight exaggeration to say that for the first time in human history, in the contemporary United States large numbers of people can live exactly the kind of lives they want, unconstrained by material, economic, or cultural limitations."

Then Schwartz asks an intriguing question: If such choice is so great, why has there been such an explosive growth in the number of people with depression? "Some estimates," he writes, "are that depression is 10 times more likely to afflict someone now than at the turn of the century."

That's because, in addition to being good, choice can be profoundly hard on us. Freedom rightly means that nobody can tell us how to live our lives. We are ultimately responsible for our choices and, by the same token, for our failures. The only problem is we don't have a crystal ball. We can't know until after we've committed to an action whether we chose correctly.

This can make even seemingly innocuous choices paralyzing.

Consider [a 1992 study](#) published in the journal Psychological Science. Researchers asked people to imagine that they were in the market for a CD player. As they were passing a store one day, they noticed a popular Sony model on sale for only \$99, a fantastic price. But it had to be purchased that day, because the sale would be over the next day.

Not surprisingly, two thirds of people said they'd buy the player then and there. Only the remaining third said they'd defer their decision until later. This makes sense; it's rational not to pass up a great opportunity.

The interesting results came from a slightly different version of this question the researchers asked a second set of participants. These people were told they were passing by the same store and saw the same Sony player on sale for \$99. But they also saw that a top-of-the-line AIWA player was on sale for only \$159, an equally steep discount over its usual price.

Interestingly, under these conditions, almost half of people said they'd defer their decision. That's because the two choices in front of them, though different from one another, appeared equally good. Under these circumstances, people tend to become paralyzed.

That's what happens to many of us as we consider whether we should change our own lives.

Asha now faced exactly that kind of dilemma, but on a much grander scale. Quitting her comfortable job and moving across the country to pursue a career in music would be an enormous risk. Then again, she was only 28 years old and already feeling stagnant.

She took the leap.

So, what led Asha to act when others would have stayed stuck? Her answer is simple: she was alive, and with a new understanding of life's limited span, she felt a strong need to experience each day fully. Her [cancer ordeal](#) had changed the calculus in her mind. To her, the risk of staying put — of remaining in her comfortable but unsatisfying life — clearly outweighed the risk of moving to a new city.

One afternoon, she picked up her violin from a repair shop in downtown Los Angeles. The guy who made her instrument said he knew Dee Snider, the lead singer of Twisted Sister, who just happened to be trying out electric violinists to join his new tour. Although Asha thought her chances were slim, she auditioned. Two months later, she celebrated her 30th birthday on a tour bus with one of the top metal vocalists of all time.

Motivated by her passion for this new career, one opportunity led to the next. Asha was hired to play alongside Alanis Morissette, and after that, on a U.S. tour with Gnarlz Barkley, opening for the Red Hot Chili Peppers in front of 30,000 people a night. Jay-Z and Mary J. Blige both tapped her to play. Her reputation on the rise, in 2009 she played regularly for the American Idol band and The Tonight Show.

Yet, while the decision to radically change her life looked easy to many, Asha admits that she experienced many moments of doubt throughout.

Though trauma is undeniably horrible, Asha will be the first to tell you that it can present unexpected opportunities to grow. According to two decades of research, 50 to 80 percent of people who have lived through trauma say they've grown in some way. The trick is to be open to and embrace these new choices, to notice them even in the midst of suffering.

When we look at the situation with our eyes fully open, we're able to see the potential for other possibilities. That gives all of us, when we encounter crises in our own lives, the opportunity to not merely bounce back, but to bounce forward, changing our lives in ways we might never have thought possible.

Cowritten by Lee Daniel Kravetz