

# Take Ownership of Your Future Self

By Benjamin Hardy August 28, 2020

<https://hbr.org/2020/08/take-ownership-of-your-future-self>

Your personality, skills, likes, and dislikes change over time — but that change isn't out of your control. What can you do to become the version of yourself that you most want to be? Start by acknowledging the differences between your past, current, and future selves....

In his TED Talk “The Psychology of Your Future Self,” Harvard psychologist Dr. Daniel Gilbert explains a bias that almost all of us have: We tend to think that the person we are today is the person we will always be.

Most people, when asked if they are the same person they were 10 years ago, will say no — but we have a much harder time seeing potential for change in the future. Gilbert and others refer to this as the “end of history illusion.” Despite awareness that our past self is clearly different than our present self, we tend to think that who we are right now is the “real” and “finished” version of ourselves, and our future self will be basically the same as who we are today. Gilbert puts it simply: “Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished.”

Your personality, skills, likes, and dislikes change over time — whether you're intentional about that change or not. A recently published study that spanned more than 60 years found that the personalities of nearly all participants were completely different than they had been 60 years prior.

Change is inevitable, but it's not out of your control. Below, we provide three strategies to help you become your desired future self.

## Step 1: Distinguish Your Former, Current, and Future Selves

As a rule, people tend to place extreme emphasis on their present selves. We tend to cling to our current identities and speak in incredibly definitive terms about who we are now, i.e., “I'm an introvert,” “I'm not good with people,” etc. These labels leave little wiggle room for change and growth, creating what Harvard psychologist Dr. Ellen Langer calls “mindlessness.”

When you assume a label about yourself, you stop seeing alternatives. As Langer explains, “If something is presented as an accepted truth, alternative ways of thinking do not even come up

for consideration ... [for example] when people are depressed they tend to believe they are depressed all the time. Mindful attention to variability shows this is not the case.”

The truth is, you're not the same person you were in the past. You don't do things the same way you once did. You no longer want what you once wanted. Instead of labeling yourself and focusing on who you are today, recognize how much you've grown and changed from your former self.

As entrepreneurial coach Dan Sullivan explains, you should “measure the gain, not the gap.” You can train yourself to see even short-term growth by measuring progress on a weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis. Just ask yourself: What wins have I had in the past 90 days? Once you start to distinguish between your current and former selves, it becomes possible to view your future self as a different person as well.

## Step 2: Imagine Your Desired Future Self

It's much easier to default to the present than to imagine a different future. But if you don't take the time to imagine who you want to be, then you'll reactively become whatever life drives you towards. Research has shown that shaping your future self requires “deliberate practice,” or the ability to develop yourself towards a specific goal. You can't effectively grow without a direction to that growth; you need a clear goal to shape the process.

For example, when I decided I wanted to become a professional writer, the idea alone wasn't enough. I had to turn my idea into a measurable outcome — getting a six-figure book deal with one of the Big Five publishers in New York — and then I could reverse-engineer a process for reaching that goal. Having a clear goal enabled me to ask useful questions to the right people.

In addition, research shows that both motivation and hope stem from the combination of a clear, desired outcome, the belief that you can

succeed, and a path to get there. The burgeoning field of positive psychology has flipped many old assumptions, finding that humans are not driven solely by their pasts, but rather are actually drawn forward by their own views of the future — a concept psychologists refer to as “prospection.”

Put simply, your behavior in the present is largely shaped by your view of your own future. If your future is clear, exciting, and something you believe you can create, then your behavior in the present will reflect that.

So, who is your future self? Only you have that answer to that question. As Dr. Gilbert explains, the first step is imagining your future self. Your future self is not someone you discover, but someone you decide to be.

One way to begin that imaginative process is through journaling. Start by asking yourself: What are one to three things I could do today to make progress toward my future self? Any action you take will likely be outside your comfort zone, since your current comfort zone is determined by your current personality. But if you push through that initial discomfort, you’ll become more psychologically flexible, and over time, grow into the person you want to be.

### Step 3: Change Your Identity Narrative

Identity is far more powerful than personality. Identity drives behaviors, which over time, become personality. Your personality — the sum of your consistent attitudes and behaviors — is merely a byproduct of identity.

Your identity narrative is the story you tell about yourself: past, present, and future. If your identity is rooted in your past and present alone, that fixed mindset can make personality feel permanent. But if you focus on envisioning your future self, instead of fixating on your current self, it becomes possible to change your identity narrative.

This isn’t just something you should think about internally. Tell those around you who you want to be! It’s not about “faking it until you make it,” but rather honestly and humbly acknowledging that your future self is in fact a different person than who you are today. You’re not your future self yet, but that’s where you’re going.

Of course, this takes courage. It’s much easier to just say, “This is who I am.” Publicly saying “This is who I want to be” is risky, since you’re not guaranteed to succeed. But it’s also the only way to be intentional about who you become.

Telling people who you want to be is incredibly powerful because it will compel you to make your behavior consistent with your new story. If your identity narrative is rooted in the past, your past will determine your behavior. But if you intentionally decide who your future self will be — and find the courage to share that vision with others — it becomes possible to actively transform into that desired future self.

Dr. Carol Dweck has spoken about the importance of being defined not by the present, but by who you want to be. We are all in a constant state of becoming. So, let your desired future self be the thing predicting your current behavior — not your past.

Your behavior signals back to you the type of person you think you are, solidifying your identity and eventually becoming your personality. It is your behavior that creates your personality, not the other way around.

So who do you want to be? Start telling people.

Start acting like your future self, rather than your former self. Embrace uncertainty and change. Embrace learning and failure. Never be defined by “now.” Engage in deliberate practice so that over time, you’ll grow into your own ever-evolving story. Take action, and invest in building your future identity.

*As an old person, I would only add that I have never had a clear end goal; I don't want to limit myself by making decisions based on my current knowledge when everything is changing so fast...and I'm learning so much. For instance: I would have never set a goal that included presenting Fair Shake at a White House event!*

*Commit to your future you by leaving room for growth and change!*

*I hope you enjoyed this piece.*

*Ubuntu! ~ sue*