



A Change Will Do You Good

By Tonya Pendleton, Special to BET.com

Do you spend hours daydreaming about a different job, life or relationship? Or maybe life has thrown you a curveball and you are recognizing that you need to make changes to get back on top.

Change can be uncomfortable -- even when the change is something we want bad -- and it's easy to postpone making moves that take us out of our comfort zones. As Black women, we have to break the cycle of putting ourselves last and of letting our obligations hold us back. Make your own breaks or be ready to seize the moment if the catalyst for change is unexpected.

That's what Beverly Williams, who was happily living as a big girl, had to do. The 30-something New Yorker says she was never bothered by her weight and led a full social life, including a boyfriend. But at 4'10", she weighed more than 200 pounds and had all but ignored the warnings from her doctor about the risks it posed to her health. For her, and so many others, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 drove home the need for change.

"I was one of those people who had to walk home [on 9/11] and I thought that in itself would kill me," she says of the almost 200 city blocks she walked to get home. "I didn't realize how out of shape I was. I was totally out of breath and I thought I was just going to die."

Armed with the gift of a blank check for a gym membership from a close girlfriend, Williams decided to take her health seriously and joined a health club near her home in Harlem, N.Y.

"The first three months was the hardest thing I've ever done in my whole entire life," she says. But after seeing results, she stuck with it and eventually lost 90 pounds, going from a size 22 to a size 8. She even shed the waist-length dreadlocks she had grown and groomed for 17 years to complete her transformation.

Not only did working out transform her body, it also changed her entire outlook in life. The former magazine executive has traded in her keyboard and now works at her gym as a membership consultant.

Losing weight did affect other areas in her life too - her then-boyfriend left her and friends who depended on her to be a "big Bev" mother figure departed. Today, she has a boyfriend 10 years her junior and says men who would never have been interested in her as a big woman began approaching her.

"I feel very blessed right now. No matter what, I came to the gym. Because I've made it a habit it's not hard to work out. It's my stress release and the results [motivated me]. I would have been happy at a [size] 14."

New York City-based life coach Teresa Kennedy, who now helps other African-American women improve their lives, is her own best example of the challenges of transformation.

As a vice president at MTV Networks with an MBA from Harvard, Kennedy was on the fast track. But in 1997, her rise up the corporate ladder was temporarily halted when she was hospitalized with an ulcerated digestive system at age 27 and almost died.

"It was the best thing that could have happened to me," she says. "I was defining myself by my job. I had fun, it was wonderful, but it still was not fulfilling. I was highly successful --in the top 1 percent of earnings-- but I felt trapped."

Still, she stayed on at her corporate job for two more years after her recovery. Her will to change eventually came, she says, through a series of "Aha!" moments including her father's struggle with Alzheimer's and her aunt's battle with breast cancer.

"You climb that ladder and you realize that it's propped up against the wrong wall. I see that in so many people," Kennedy says. They are climbing a ladder but they haven't seen what wall it's up against. They get the money or the title and they're not happy or balanced."

Kennedy's true happiness came when she started her own Harlem-based company, Power Living, which provides life coaching, yoga instruction and holistic nutrition counseling. Kennedy says change may come slowly, but it's certainly possible.

"It's not going to be easy. It's the power of choice. Destiny is not a matter of chance, it's a matter of choice," she says adding that you shouldn't let your current situation cloud your vision for your future.

That was something Danielle Thompson had to learn the hard way after trying, but not originally succeeding in leaving her abusive husband. She says she knew she had to leave her abusive husband or one of them would have ended up dead.

At 19, the New York-based Thompson married her boyfriend despite her suspicion he was cheating with a family member. Their wedding took place the day of his mother's funeral and both families embraced the union as a positive sign in the midst of tragedy. But after six blissful months the abuse began. After he experienced several other major deaths in his family, his grief turned him into a hard drinker who stayed out late and violently abused her.

"I think this made me a stronger person who could take care of myself," she says today. After a particularly violent night, Thompson left her husband and moved out on her own for the first time and has been independent ever since. She has never experienced another abusive relationship. "I don't know why I had to do it this way, but I had to learn to take care of myself and [set boundaries]. I used to let people walk all over me. It helped me to talk more about what's going on with me to my friends or those close to me now."

Life coach Robyn Manning, of New York-based Kriya Associates, agrees that the key to successful transformation is to first believe that you can change and then act upon it. She suggests tools such as journaling and affirmations to help you clarify your goals and move more strongly towards them. Also, utilize resources around you like elders or pick up self-help or spiritual books that tackle the types of changes you hope to achieve. Most importantly, you must change your perspective and realize that you have to keep working on your goal even when transforming your life is difficult.

"There are lessons in change," Manning says. "And it's only going through the pain of that change that you move through to the other side. It actually doesn't have to hurt long. The more skillful you get at recognizing this as part of the growth process the less you experience change as painful and more as an awesome journey of discovery."