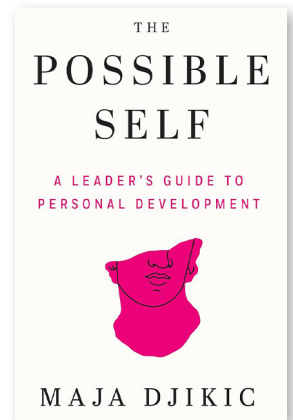


# The Possible Self

A Leader's Guide to Personal Development

by **Maja Djikic**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Development - a natural process that makes living beings grow over time into possible future selves - is a hallmark of all life. Yet what seems so simple for flowers and infants is far more complicated for adults. Development is possible throughout our lifetime, until our very last breath. As adults, though, we find that this same force that is supposed to move us to our potential can stall. When we encounter a seemingly intractable problem in some domain of our life and try to change, we can find ourselves at a loss.

What makes us stuck, why can't we change, and should we even keep trying? The battle for self-change is often grueling and painful, and we may want to give up, but giving up the struggle feels like abandoning the person we could become: our possible self. In *The Possible Self: A Leader's Guide to Personal Development*, author, personality psychologist, and adult development expert Maja Djikic calls on us to not give up, helping us transform with knowledge and techniques that we can use to get unstuck and create a lasting change in our lives.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The five parts that make up the Wheel of Self.
- How to connect to our core wants to develop.
- Why changing behavior alone does not lead to lasting change.
- The three minds that work together to change frozen constructs.

## Part I: The Wheel of Self

### When the Wheel Stops Working

One way to think of the self is as having five different parts, arranged into a wheel: motivation, behavior, emotion, mind, and body. When most of us try to change, we often focus only on behavior. What we forget is that behavior is governed by the other parts of self.

When the Wheel of Self is moving well, all five parts of the self are in harmonious, developmental motion, seamlessly supporting the change. When in the midst of this process, we don't have to try to change, apply willpower, or develop habits to keep our new behaviors. It is as if all parts of the self conspire to develop a new way of being. When the wheel of self is moving well, we don't *try* to develop, we simply *do*.

What happens when the Wheel of Self stalls? We try, over and over again, to change, but our strategies to build new behavioral routines never seem to work. When we try to change behavior in one direction, while our minds, emotions, and bodies are fighting the opposite tendency, what we are producing is not a self change but a form of self fragmentation.

This kind of change leaves us stressed, exhausted, and full of guilt once we revert to the old behavior. *For a successful and lasting inner change, we need all the parts of the self to move together.*

Motivationally, what we want may get very intense and turn into a desire—a chronically unfulfilled goal. When we don't get what we want for a long time, we can lose hope, yet this hopelessness is temporary. We can try to stop wanting some change or pretend that we no longer want it, but the desire will surge again.

Behaviorally, desire and hopelessness lead us to *alternate between overdoing and distractions*. Desire makes us hurry to achieve our goals, and we pour time and energy into self-change. When this happens, overdoing gives way to distractions, where we abandon what we desire and try to forget about it.

In the emotional realm, the long unfulfilled desire can permeate our life. It's difficult to relax and do enjoyable things if the looming unsatisfied want is always in the background. Many negative emotions show up when we feel stuck. A sense of hopelessness, dread, restlessness, and despair are common.

The mind *ruminates or obsessively thinks* about how to gain

our goal while increasingly doubting that it is possible. Another trick our mind plays on us is to mask hopelessness with the appearance of genuine acceptance. Our inner voice says things like, "I'm fine with it. I'm even better off without it." Yet despite these thin reassurances, and many distractions to stop thinking about it, giving up feels like an impossible option.

Finally, the body cannot but be drained by all the mental, emotional, and behavioral activity that keeps leading nowhere. It's easy to forget that the stress of inner conflict is energetically expensive. If ruminative thinking about past failures and future fantasies continues for an extended period, the body under stress may start showing signs of illness.

## Part II: Working with the Wheel

### Motivation

Wants are the force of our motivational system, pulling us toward our potential. One way to think of how wants function is to start with the core, or developmental wants, which need a method of fulfillment. Before we even understand language, we start forming beliefs, or constructs, of how to achieve what we want and the constructs can stay implicit throughout adulthood.

The most effective constructs tend to relate thematically to the want itself. Take the core need of forming friendships. Treating others well is relational in nature and much more likely to lead to close friendships than something like having an interesting job, for example.

Furthermore, effective constructs are direct actions someone can take now to fulfill the want.

Ineffective constructs promise fulfillment in the far future. This causes the core wants to get associated with other wants, each increasingly more distant from the original. The further we get from the core want, the less satisfied we feel when we achieve the outer layer ones, since they only peripherally, if at all, satisfy the want at the core.

The key to our development and fulfillment, then, is to try to excavate and satisfy our core wants. The paradox of success without fulfillment, where we feel dissatisfied and restless despite having accomplished societally admired heights of achievement, is often based on the distance between our core wants and the outer layer of wants we have achieved. The further we are from the core, the less satisfied we will likely be.

# Our ability to fulfill our potential depends on holding on to the invisible thread that connects us to our core wants.

Let's say we want self-respect. Buying an expensive watch (an outer layer want) because we want admiration (middle layer want), which we think will give us self-respect (core want) is not likely to work very well or for long. On the other hand, knowing ourselves and acting in accordance with who we are will directly produce the self-respect we want.

*Our ability to fulfill our potential depends on holding on to the invisible thread that connects us to our core wants.*

## Behavior

Now that we have done the difficult work of finding the core wants, what are we to do next? Why should we hesitate to directly satisfy our core wants by changing behavior? Because *when we are stuck in some part of our life, the blocks to change extend not just to wants, but emotions, mind, and the body too, which makes behavioral change difficult to sustain.*

Rather than launch into action, we need to restore enough willpower to move the rest of the Wheel of Self. What that means is that, paradoxically, our task will be to *do less* and sometimes even *do nothing*. Doing less of what hasn't worked in the past will help us restore willpower, to give us enough energy to continue our inner work.

When we attempt to change something about ourselves—eat better, exercise more, become more assertive, or build better relationships—focusing on changing only the behavior without moving other parts of the self frequently results in self-defeat. We will have employed our willpower to push one spoke of the wheel in one direction, while the rest of the wheel's momentum is going in the opposite direction. It is no surprise that after a while we feel drained and broken. Using willpower on any (or all) other parts of the self is likely to be more effective.

We need to *restore willpower sufficiently to move emotions, mind, and old neural pathways in a new direction.* What we want is to make sustained movement in the whole Wheel of Self so that our new way of being will continue naturally and not require either habit or willpower to maintain over time. It will simply be our natural, new way of being.

Often, just before we sleep, we feel our cup of willpower has

been drained. Yet, in the morning, we wake up with a full cup of energy and start pouring it out all over again. Overnight our willpower got restored. Just as a fatigued muscle needs rest to restore strength, sleep restores willpower.

Other activities that research has shown to improve self-regulation are exposure to nature, anything that makes you laugh or smile, and meditation. Meditation, in particular, is known to expand the size of the cup of willpower, and it does so over the long term.

Finally, all intrinsically motivated activities that engage core, developmental wants also restore our willpower. This gives us a whole host of unique restorers of self-regulation that can be physical, social, individual, creative, or spiritual.

## Emotion

Emotions are a signaling system that tells us where we stand in relation to our wants. Not only do they signal to us, but they also give us energy and prompt us toward what we have to do to get closer to what we want. When emotions work well and we interpret their signals correctly, they become our guides in effectively protecting ourselves, overcoming obstacles, grieving our losses, and feeling happiness as we get closer to our wants. However, being stuck in some domain of our life distorts our emotional signals so they become difficult to interpret.

When we feel negative emotions, such as being dissatisfied, anxious, or restless, we tend to view the emotions themselves as the problem. Blaming the signal for telling us something we don't want to hear is a bit like blaming pain for signaling that we have been injured. We often treat negative emotions as the enemy, trying to avoid, suppress, or distract ourselves from feeling them to continue with our life as it is. Our emotions, however, will continue signaling for change. The very thing we don't want to experience holds the key to achieving our wants.

Contrary to our everyday use of the word "emotional", emotions are rational at their very core. The amygdala is the part of the brain central to processing emotions. Damage to the amygdala impairs our ability to process emotions

and thus, impairs decision making. We need our emotions to function well to act rationally.

There is an additional component of emotion. Between the situation and the signal, there are lenses that represent our constructs or beliefs. It's the construct or belief that will decide which emotion we'll feel in response to a situation. The very same situation— an environmental disaster, for example, will make some people angry, some sad, some fearful, and others energized. The same situation in different minds will bring about different emotions and, therefore, different actions.

An interesting implication of this way of thinking about emotions is that we can't have an emotion without there being a goal or a want. We often believe we simply wake up with emotions or that they come from nowhere. This seeming unpredictability of emotions, particularly negative ones, can make us feel powerless.

In reality, *negative emotions come when we veer away from our goals, and they go away as soon as we are back on track to fulfill them.*

Emotions are meant to be temporary, as would be logical for a signaling system. A traffic light that is always red or always green would lose its function and purpose.

Because we are so used to experiencing emotions in the background of our activities, we may get the impression that emotions are there to be felt. But emotions, if we could give them a voice, would urge us, "Don't just feel me, DO something!" A tool we have at our disposal is choice. Resilience, the ability to not just cope with troubled circumstances, but flourish despite them, can be found in how we leverage this uniquely human tool.

There are two ways you can apply choice: learning how to fully process negative emotions in the moment, and building resilience in the long term.

To process emotions in the moment, follow this technique:

1. Approach, rather than suppress, distract, or express it, giving space and time to experience it.
2. Calm and comfort ourselves.
3. Examine the wants and constructs that underlie our emotions.
4. Strategize.
5. Create a plan to take action.

Practices that we can employ long-term cultivate our resilience,

allowing us to not just cope, but flourish in uncertain and troubling circumstances. We cultivate resilience by applying the lever of choice to all components of our emotions.

We can apply choice to:

- Which wants or goals we want to pursue.
- Situations we put ourselves in and how to change our environment to suit us better.
- Change the beliefs or constructs through which we see the world.
- Learn how to express an emotion when it arrives.

When our emotional system is working well, we can move past our obstacles toward our wants and pivot from our losses toward re-engagement, with new goals and relationships.

### Mind

We've now reached the part of our inner work in which we have to reflect on constructs and beliefs that contribute to our inability to get what we desire the most. When a closed construct shows up in our mind, along with other thoughts, it's difficult not to believe them. We have to learn to recognize which ones are accurate and which ones are distorted.

It is far more difficult to get to the truth of ourselves by using our minds than we commonly believe. The mind can argue any side of the case, and when our Wheel of Self is stalled because some of our constructs are frozen in time and don't reflect the reality of ourselves or the world, it is the same mind we need to use to get it moving again.

The mind, in fact, is the central lever that can notice the problem in the self and apply techniques and experiences that will guide it toward change. That's exactly what we do, when we use our mind to probe our wants, to understand rather than distract from strong negative emotions, and intervene to reshape parts of our nervous system to lay down new neural pathways.

How can the mind do such contradictory things— be the cause of the problems, and the pathway to its solution? How can the mind intervene in the mind? It does so by not being one mind. Instead of thinking of ourselves as having one mind, we can think of having three:

1. The Problem Solver: the conscious mind
2. The Intuiter: the unconscious mind
3. The Choice-Maker: the meta mind

# We use the conscious mind to structure experiences that restructure the unconscious mind.

The Problem Solver is the mind we most identify with—the one that can do complex calculations, think through a difficult problem, and carve a path toward a solution. This mind, which we believe does everything for us, turns out to be a very small, powerful, and energy-expensive imagining device. It is small both in terms of how many things we can have in our minds at the same time, and how quickly it processes information, which is estimated at 50 bits per second.

The Intuiter is the unconscious mind. Given its immense capacity, the unconscious is where we store all our learnings, including our expertise. In terms of processing speed, the most conservative accounts put it at 11,000,000 bits per second, a staggeringly fast system.

What we call an instinct is a thought, emotion, or urge to action that is the result of all the processing done by the unconscious mind. This is where all that we have learned in our life waits patiently until we need it, and then just shows up in our awareness. This is important because the closed constructs that we struggle with come to our awareness automatically from the unconscious mind.

If we only had the Problem Solver and the Intuiter as our minds, we could never challenge what they say. Fortunately, there is a third mind that observes what the Problem Solver and the Intuiter are up to.

The Choice Maker is the mind that allows us to watch ourselves think and have thoughts. Without it, we wouldn't be capable of meta-cognition—we couldn't think about thinking or having thoughts. When things are going well, the meta-mind can inconspicuously direct attention to whatever is relevant at the moment.

If there's a problem, the meta-mind directs attention to what it believes to be the source of the problem—our own mind. We become self-conscious. The Choice-Maker notices that something may be amiss, directs itself to our own mind and body, and then makes a decision.

To be able to change, we have to detect and update our closed constructs, which is the source of our problem. We

must direct the Choice Maker to illuminate our closed constructs, with the help of the Problem Solver. The Problem Solver is crucial in solving the issue of closed constructs, but not by ordering the rest of the mind about.

Instead, with Choice Maker's help, it will gather the information necessary to design experiences that will allow the rebuilding of close constructs that distort our view of ourselves in the world. *We use the conscious mind to structure experiences that restructure the unconscious mind.*

## Body

Given that closed constructs are neural pathways carried in our body, just knowing what they are, and even how they came to be, doesn't make them reopen automatically. The Problem Solver can't force the Intuiter to update or change the construct.

*Insight may be necessary, but it is not sufficient for transformation.* It needs to be joined with an experience that opens the lid to the closed construct, and only then can we update it, getting the Wheel of Self to move again. The difficulty is that the source experience that closed the construct is most often *in the past*.

To update it we need to go to that source experience, to the past, to lay down a new set of neural pathways. To understand what makes this possible, we need to explore the part of ourselves that allows us to have a past in the first place—our body.

From an evolutionary perspective, we can think of our bodies as vessels made of the past meant to act in the present while looking to the future. The first obvious thing that bodies do is move us around to meet their wants.

The second function of the body is to carry our past, in our brain and nervous system, as well as the muscles, joints, organs, blood cells, immune cells, and many other constituents of the body whose actions in the present moment are altered by the memory of the past.

Bodies hold our learnings and employ them forward as we encounter new situations. If the body carries our learnings,

it also carries our constructs that distort our experience. The closed constructs that feed these unconscious patterns are carried in the body, so it will be in the body that changes required for re-learning will have to occur.

To loosen the lid of a closed construct we need a different, non-linear model of change. We've all known individuals who make a dramatic change seemingly overnight. This is possible because when our emotional system is dysregulated, the nervous system gets into high gear and can build new neural pathways more quickly. Instead of slow, gradual change, we see dramatic and sudden transformations.

Whether the change is positive or negative doesn't depend only on the intensity of the emotional distress, but whether or not it is caused by external circumstances or is part of our own exploration of change.

Emotional dysregulation is like a force that can be used to either shut the lid down on constructs or open them back up, depending on the intensity and voluntariness of the event. What we see then is that emotional dysregulation provides the first ingredient that is essential to a transformative change.

The second ingredient is the information that will be poured into the new construct. Think of it as a new framework or way of looking at ourselves and the world. The nervous system has activated to lay down new pathways quickly, but what exactly it will encode depends on what information it gets. Self-guided re-learning can be designed to open our constructs and lead to development.

There are two components you need to have ready to design a re-learning experience to update your closed constructs.

1. Finding the significant events that caused the closing of the constructs, and;
2. Finding a new framework or experience that would have allowed the processing of the significant event.

To find the events, we must turn to memories and ask two questions:

1. Which memories from the past intrude on our mind when we think of the construct?
2. Do we still have strong emotions about these events?

We can find new frameworks for the problems we encountered during significant events in two ways: as information and as experiences. If we think of a new framework as

information, we will follow the beginning steps of cognitive behavioral therapy. We will notice the unhelpful, frozen cognitive constructs, and explore other, more helpful ones.

Another way to think about the new framework is not as information, but as experience. If the construct was created in childhood, for example, one easy exercise to find new frames is to imagine a younger sibling, a child, a niece, or a nephew, in a similar situation and see how we would react to them. As adults, we can take that experiential exercise and offer what we need to our younger selves to reframe it.

The strategies above can be explored more deeply with the support of a friend, therapist, or partner. They can also be repeated as many times as needed to update closed constructs.

We grow and develop naturally, guided and pulled by our potential that manifests in our interests and things we love—whether ideas, skills, hobbies, careers, or people. This is why it's so painful when our development stalls or stops. When we work through each part of the Wheel of Self—motivation, behavior, emotions, mind, and the embodied past—we can get unstuck.



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