



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Feeling Stuck? Simple Ideas for Change

“You belong somewhere you feel free.” ~ Tom Petty

It could be within the context of a relationship, or a specific case, or a job where you don't feel appreciated or, worse yet, where you feel abused. Maybe you started your own practice or firm and things aren't working out; you took on a client who is turning out to be more difficult than you anticipated; or, perhaps, you just feel like you're in a rut. The feeling of being trapped or stuck can be triggered by any number of circumstances. At the very least, the feeling is uncomfortable and can be irritating; at its worst, feeling trapped can lead to anxiety, depression, unhappiness, and despair. The feeling of being stuck is always a sign that something needs to change, or, as the saying goes, “something's gonna give.” The question becomes *what* needs to change. Is it your perspective? Is it the relationship? Is it your job? Is it your approach to the situation? When we feel trapped, it's important to distract or distance ourselves from the situation that is causing us discomfort. The work then becomes to examine our options from a calmer, more rational view point.

Einstein said, “you can't solve a problem from the same level of consciousness that created it.” When we are thinking about the situation, and mentally adding to the justifications we have for being upset, the situation just gets worse in our mind. In order to objectively examine the situation, we need to distance ourselves from it. If you can physically remove yourself from the source of your frustration, that is ideal; but often, the best we can do is mentally distance ourselves from the person or situation. Distract yourself by paying attention to something else for a while. When we feel trapped or stuck, our nervous system amps up because the body believes we are in danger, and that takes energy and attention away from the brain. Therefore, when we feel upset about being trapped or stuck, our brain is not operating at its best, and we can't assess the situation with “all cylinders firing.” Distract yourself or physically distance yourself from the person or the situation with the intent to calm yourself down. From a calmer place, you can look at the feeling of being stuck with a new, more objective view point. Attorneys are usually excellent problem solvers, but none of us make good decisions about our own circumstances when our nervous system is activated. As Evan Esar aptly pointed out, “anger is the feeling that makes your mouth work faster than your mind.” Making rash decisions, including saying things you do not mean or will regret later, never bodes well for us in the end, and often makes things worse.

Once we find a more rational, calmer view point, the reasons for our feelings become clearer, and we can make informed choices about how to proceed. Since feeling trapped is always a sign that something must change, the first step is figuring out what change is needed. Perhaps the practice of law is no longer of interest or perhaps you want to change the area of law that you practice. At COLAP, we regularly receive calls from attorneys who are looking for a change; they no longer want to be a litigator, or they no longer enjoy the type of law they are practicing. They may no longer want to practice law at all, but are looking for a career where their law degree or 'legal mind' would be beneficial. If a career change is needed, there are resources to help maneuver what can seem like a complicated endeavor.

The change needed could simply be about the physical environment. We no longer live in an era where individuals stay in the same career, let alone with the same employer, for their entire lives. If you are getting bored by doing the same thing, or you no longer believe your current employment is a good fit for you, maybe you need to look outside the box for new challenges. There are many opportunities, both within and outside the legal profession; sometimes you just need a little help in finding the right course of action towards that new career.

Sometimes, however, the feeling of being trapped is signaling that you need to change your perspective about the situation, or about life in general. Perhaps you have been putting blame on others for their behavior, when really the issue has to do with the way you are perceiving their actions. Are you being hard on others because they aren't behaving in ways that you want them to? We get into a mindset where we forget that people are free to be, to say, or to behave in the ways that they see fit. Obviously extreme behaviors can be punishable by law, but generally, no one has the right to control what another person thinks, says, or does. As Eckhart Tolle pointed out, "when you complain, you make yourself a victim. Leave the situation, change the situation, or accept it. All else is madness." When we can't change the situation, we can either accept it or leave it. That could mean ending a relationship, or simply leaving the room. Alternatively, we can accept it. Accepting something doesn't mean that we agree with it, but that we acknowledge "it is what it is."

The concept of freedom is really a mental state. Our state of mind determines freedom from the feeling of being trapped. From a cognitive perspective, we know that if we don't mindfully direct our thoughts, they will direct us; the brain will repeat the same patterns of thoughts as though they are addictive if we do not intervene. For example, we need to intervene when we repeat negative thoughts about something we have no control over, coming up with different ways to justify our anger, frustration, or any other number of negative feelings. In those cases, our thoughts do not help solve a problem, but rather

perpetuate it in our mind. We actually create more suffering when we have viewpoints that cause us suffering about things we cannot change. Benjamin Franklin said “the man who trades freedom for security does not deserve, nor will he ever receive, either.” Our old belief systems or perspectives might give us security, but they do not make us free; instead, they can hold us back and prevent us from growing.

Change is not always easy. Whether it is changing a circumstance, a relationship, a job, or a perspective, we often fear change because we don’t know what our lives will look like after we take the leap. One thing is for sure: the only consistent, reliable thing in life (except death and taxes, of course) is change. We can embrace it and direct it, or we can be at the mercy of changes that we have no say or part in. Being proactive if you feel stuck or trapped in a situation will empower you and help you face the excuses you have been making to prevent change from happening.

If you are contemplating making a change, or if you simply feel stuck in some situation at work or personal life and need some guidance, contact us for confidential, free assistance. The majority of our calls are from attorneys who are looking for some direction on how to change their present circumstances. We can assist you in getting the “ball rolling” in whatever level of change you are ready for!

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