

Shift It!
Let Go of Fear and Get Your Life in Gear
Jeffrey Hull, Ph.D.

Introduction.

Have you ever felt like you've reached the end of the road with your job or your relationship but have no idea where to turn or what to do about it? Well, you are not alone! Over the twenty years that I have been working as a counselor, coach and therapist, I have repeatedly encountered clients, who, somewhere between the ages of 35 and 55 (could be older or younger as well!) reach a *dead end* with their career, their spouse, their business partner, or even their family. By the time they reach out for help, they may be in full-blown mid-life meltdown. Of course, when clients seek me out for assistance, I am always honored and moved by their courage. It is humbling to acknowledge that you just can't get through all of life's struggles and challenges on your own. At that crucial juncture, I do my best to support them to get back on the path of joy, vitality, and fulfillment. Yet, as they exit my office I always ask myself this question: does this cycle of painful endings and awkward beginnings always have to be so HARD? I think not, which is why I am writing this book.

The cycles of life—of beginnings, middles, endings and new beginnings—are unavoidable. But they do not have to be long, drawn out or even egregiously painful. The key to moving with ease and grace through life's ups and downs—the ones that are inevitable at least—is to KNOW WHERE YOU ARE IN THE CYCLE, and act accordingly. Major shifts in our lives are often messy, murky and migraine-inducing, but they do not have to be. “*Shift It!*” is designed with two major goals in mind: to help you to identify WHERE YOU ARE and to learn HOW TO MOVE WITH EASE through the inevitable cycles of life's journey. The process is not always easy, and unfortunately, none of the stages can be ignored, avoided or skipped over. But they can be worked through with less effort, less pain, less stress, and, above all, more focus, acceleration, and optimism. This book is designed to help you take the mystery out of the madness.

Ask yourself the questions below. If you answer “yes” to any or all of them, “*Shift It!*” is for you!!

- Are you between the ages of 35-55, reached a modicum of success in your job, but sometimes wonder “is that all there is”?
- Have you been in a primary relationship for a number of years and find yourself lying in bed next to your partner wondering: who is this guy/gal?
- Do you sometimes ask yourself: Where is this relationship going? Do I still want to be on this train?
- Do you spend a lot of your time day-dreaming about living a different life, with a different partner and a different job?
- Do you sometimes just want to get off the trajectory of your life and take a long break...preferably in a foreign land?
- Do you wake up some days thinking: “how did I get here?” This is NOT where I intended to be at this point in my life...

If any or all of the above are true for you, congratulations! Your life is shifting. You are in a process of transformation and renewal. Unfortunately, in order to be re-born afresh, there is a catch: certain aspects of how you know yourself to be will have to die. Just as a butterfly sheds the cocoon when it emerges in full winged regalia, some aspects of your identity may have outworn their usefulness. But how do you go about discarding what no longer serves you without casting off house and home, lovers and loved ones, talents used and unused? That is the key question, and here is the rub: only by recognizing the transformational process in action and working through it consciously, with compassion for yourself and others, can a successful “*life-shift*” be assured. Otherwise, you may just meltdown completely, dissolving into an endless sea of your own tears...and fears.

Over a period of ten years, working with hundreds of clients, I discovered that every client who succeeded in working through a major shift in personal identity went through six clearly discernable phases or stages along the way. I learned that when our clients face life’s upheavals armed with an awareness of the stages they will go through and get support through specific tools and practices, the entire process becomes less arduous and more navigable. In fact, after swimming the treacherous seas of self-renewal a couple of times with great success, some of our clients have clearly become ***Masters of Life-Shifting***: they have become facile, flexible and resilient in the face of life’s constant challenges. I have been so inspired by their courage, their depth of commitment to themselves and others, that deep in our hearts, I have come to believe that ANYONE can become a master at this process. The key to success is this: you must be ready, willing and able to work through each of the ***six stages of self-renewal***.

The Six Stages of Self-Renewal

The following is a synopsis of the six stages of the cycle of self-renewal. In the book, I will tackle each stage in a separate chapter, discussing in detail the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual characteristics of that particular stage. For each stage, you will learn how to recognize where you are in the process and how to use specific techniques and practices to move from one stage to the next with greater ease and less struggle.

Chapter 1. The Rut: the stage in which most people wake up to the painful reality that a shift is in the works, characterized by the following symptoms—experiencing a plateau; feeling stuck; body signals—aches and pains, ennui and/or anxiety; feelings of resistance; (FEAR factor: fear of change)

Chapter 2. The Release: the stage in which you enable old identities and self-perceptions to die; you work the emotional and mental muscles of release, characterized by the following: having the end in sight; letting go; grieving the loss; surrendering (FEAR factor: fear of death [real or imagined])

Chapter 3. The Retreat: the stage in which you give yourself permission to rest; to take a break and reconnect to your essence, characterized by embracing emptiness; going within; sitting still; practicing patience; enhanced self-care (FEAR factor: fear of being immobilized)

Chapter 4. The Revival: the “coming out” stage, where you slowly and gently re-connect the inner with the outer world, characterized by waking up; entering the realm of possibility; drafting a vision; being a beginner (FEAR factor: fear of inadequacy)

Chapter 5. The Rehearsal: the stage of “trying things on”, exploring and learning and growing, where the mantra is practice, practice, practice, characterized by the following: getting in shape; playing with purpose; employing new practices; sharing your vision (FEAR factor: fear of failure)

Chapter 6. The Realization: the stage where you recognize yourself as having arrived at a new place—a new sense of self—and you celebrate. This stage is characterized by achieving mastery; embodying the new identity, and expressing full-out (FEAR factor: fear of success)

Life-Shifting

The 6 R's of Self-Renewal



Chart 1.0

The design for the book is easy to follow and replete with diagnostic exercises, practices and tips to help you move quickly and effortlessly through each stage. Once you learn to recognize the stages and can identify where you are in any domain of your

life, you will be able to stop, breathe, get centered, and most importantly, step out with vitality and enthusiasm onto the road to renewal.

A Case-study in “Shift It!”

A successful, mid-level executive at a major entertainment and media firm, married for seven years to a software sales executive, Mary walked into my office one day and pronounced, “My life is shit.” On the surface, she had it all: a high-paying career, a job she liked with a progressive, growing company, a husband and good friends who adored her, plans for children and a home in the suburbs. Yet, when the deeper truth was revealed, on just about every front, she was miserable.

In almost every domain of Mary’s life—marriage, job, family, friends—she was experiencing an agonizing bifurcation, a split between the external view, where her life seemed to be all in order, and the excruciatingly painful truth of disappointment and despair that plagued her on the inside. In her marriage, in particular, the split between the surface and deeper realities had become unbearable. She and her husband “got along”; they socialized with friends, respected each other’s career obligations, kept in constant contact (mostly through text messages—high-tech, if not exactly intimate communication), and hung out with friends at the local sports bars on the weekends. It all looked rosy, like the picture-perfect seven year partnership. Yet, when she came to see me, they had not had intimate relations for over a year; they had not talked about anything substantial—like why they never made love—for over a year; and she was overflowing with anger and resentment towards him, with a growing laundry list of grievances.

In our first meeting, she burst into tears and shared her worst fear: that he was having an affair (which turned out to be true). She had lots of evidence that something was amiss—jewelry purchases on Ebay that never made their way to her, late nights at work that required him to stay at a hotel, mysterious phone messages that he would blatantly ignore, etc. There was also strain around finances and a growing disparity between their two career trajectories. It seemed that as her career blossomed, her husband’s job was stuck at a standstill. Although her husband made a decent wage, she paid most of the accumulating bills, while he drove around in a brand-new two-seater Lexus. It seems that as she evolved into a full-fledged adult with goals of parenting, financial success, and future stability, he regressed, holding on to the last vestiges of adolescence, eschewing responsibilities and anything and everything “adult”. Yet, despite the mounting evidence of disconnect and her fear, she hadn’t dared bring up these issues with anyone in her life, especially him. She felt terribly, terribly alone.

The good news is that Mary knew she needed help and she came looking for it. We worked together over a period of one year, slowly and deliberately traveling together down the road of personal healing and transformation. Mary learned to recognize how and why the split between her inner and outer realities manifested: because in the domain of relationship, she was living with one foot in the sixth stage of the cycle of self-renewal, “The Realization” stage, and the other in first stage of the next cycle, “The Rut”. Fundamentally, she came to see that her self-perception in different domains of her life

was built on a sense of identity that was no longer applicable. She could no longer sustain the picture that she had drawn of herself, that of devoted, sacrificing wife. The story—of being the good little girl—just no longer worked.

During the first five or so years of her marriage, her husband and she had developed a playful and intimate friendship, had enjoyed physical intimacy (although she always felt that he was “somewhat distant” in the bedroom), and generally bonded well as a couple. The identity of friend, confidante and lover that she embraced during the early stage of their relationship (what I call “The Rehearsal” phase) became fully realized sometime around their fifth year together, culminating in the move to a new city, purchase of a new home, and incipient plans for having a family. Yet, towards the end of that year and the beginning of the next, it was clear that something was amiss. Looking back over that time, Mary recognized that she had taken on additional identities that were not truly aligned with who she saw her self to be: the main bread-winner, the boss of the household, and, most discouragingly, a nagging mom. In a sense, she had become both “the good mother” (to her husband) and the “man-of-the-house”, while her husband became the “disobedient son”, and the “playboy-bad boy”.

Unfortunately, when she finally shared her concerns with him, he was unwilling to engage in the process of re-inventing their relationship together. Clearly, the opportunity existed for them to heal their love and their lives as a couple, but in the face of his decision not to take this on, Mary chose to keep working the path on her own. In our work together, Mary came to see that identities that she had embraced in earlier phases of her adult life—being a “good girl”, a “good wife”, the “strong one”—had been successful to a point, for they had supported her in creating a prosperous life for her and her husband, won her accolades as an employee, and as a wife. But they had clearly outworn their usefulness.

Embarking on the road to self-renewal together, we strode side-by-side as she navigated the six stages of the “*Life-Shifting*” process (see chart 1.0). Mary was courageous and committed to transforming her situation and re-claiming her life. She approached each stage with self-compassion, patience and diligence, working through the “Rut”—recognizing and honoring the need for change—, the “Release”—flexing the emotional muscles of letting go—, the “Retreat”—taking time to rest and go within—; and the “Revival”—crafting a vision and starting up fresh. Finally, towards the end of our work together, she entered a new stage of “Rehearsal”—excited and motivated to take her new “self” out into the world.

Ultimately, Mary ended her relationship with her husband and began a new romance with a man more committed to her vision of family and intimate partnership. Along the way, she re-evaluated her career goals and took herself off the high-powered career track of executive leadership, settling into a mid-level functional job that she liked, but more importantly, that gives her the flexibility to raise a family. To borrow a phrase from the Christian container of her childhood, Mary was reborn, but not by the church. Rather by her own soul’s desire, and her willingness to dive into the heart of her pain and engage the deep work of re-inventing herself. On the edge of despair, she bounced back in full bloom, ready to take on the next chapter of change, as she continually evolves toward manifestation of her full potential. But next time, as a *Master of Life-Shifting*, she will be ready!

Do you recognize yourself in any of Mary’s story? Maybe you have been spared—so far—the complete meltdown of a major relationship that Mary went through. Perhaps you have just had a career crisis or two...or a breakdown here and there with your significant other. We’ve all been there. The reality is that no matter how wonderful and fully “realized” our lives may be at any given moment, change is always just over the next hill...hanging out on the horizon...waiting to trip us up. But does it have to be this way? Perhaps, to a certain extent we will always be caught a bit “unaware” at times, but if we learn to watch for the signals, become awake to the symptoms, and understand the cycle of renewal-in-action, we can move through it with less struggle, less suffering, less dis-ease...maybe more *ease*. We may even come to welcome change—for deep down we all know that endings are necessary. How else do we make space for the NEW, the UNKNOWN, and the MIRACULOUS...to appear?

A Note on Fear

You will notice that FEAR is a major factor in all 6 stages of the “Life-Shifting” cycle. In fact, much like the low hum of an air conditioner or copy machine that steadily drones in the background of your daily life, fear is almost always lurking in the shadows when change is afoot. Yet, unlike the ubiquitous buzz of our electrified lives, fear does not *support* your life with energy, it does just the opposite: it *drains you of energy*.

Fear is a physical response to either the on-going, ad hoc, or one-off sting of a negative stimulus, usually one that shows up as a real or perceived threat to your physical or emotional safety. The “fight or flight” response that fear typically evokes in us—through symptoms like a racing pulse, shortened breath, tightening the chest, etc.—is hard-wired into us, designed for our own protection. In the case of a real threat to our safety, we need the adrenalin rush and the heightened sensitivity; the panic button gets us to MOVE. Yet, in most cases, the threat is mostly imagined and the mind generates both threat and response all by itself. Our greatest tool—our capacity to think—becomes our worst enemy, conjuring up all sorts of ghosts and goblins and terrorist plots that don’t really exist. More often than not fear is just this: False Evidence Appearing Real. To work with and through fear, we need to understand its methods, its madness and its convoluted logic (it hopes to protect us).

We need to turn our fear, and the mind that generates it, into a friend. These days the most common approaches to dealing with debilitating fear-reactions or phobias involve medication, as well as cognitive-behavioral techniques such as desensitization, meditation, visualizations, and flooding. Some of these approaches have been proven effective depending upon the circumstances and context. For our purposes, the key to working with fear will not be so much about masking or alleviating its symptoms, but recognizing its appearance and understanding its goals. Not all fear is the same fear. In the book, I identify six specific types of fear that accompany each stage of the cycle:

- **Stage #1. The Rut: Fear of change**
- **Stage #2. The Release: Fear of death (real and/or imagined)**
- **Stage #3. The Retreat: Fear of being immobilized (paralysis)**

- **Stage #4. The Revival: Fear of inadequacy**
- **Stage #5. The Rehearsal: Fear of failure**
- **Stage #6. The Realization: Fear of success**

Just as half the battle of transformation is recognizing where you are in the cycle and accepting that you cannot move to the next stage without completing the one you're in, the battle with fear begins with what I call "fear-awareness". My mantra is this: know the enemy! Know the weapons it carries at various stopping points along the road and you will be able to meet it head on. As we travel along our road to self-renewal, I will provide you tips and techniques for facing fear each step of the way. Fear is not just fear, it is *fear of something*, and I will help you put a name to it, understand it and address it. By knowing where you are in the process and understanding that a particular type of fear is appropriate and NORMAL for that phase, you can address your fear with specific awareness, practices and intention.

- So, are you intrigued by what you have read so far?
- Have you begun to reflect on what stage you may be in your career? In your relationships?
- Do you sense what stage you are heading into next?
- Are you prepared?

Well, if not, keep reading. Over the next weeks and months, I will share the tools, the practices and the stages of "Shift It!" ... as I write the book, YOU WILL READ IT HERE FIRST!!! Stay tuned, check it out on a regular basis...and let me know what you think!
