

MCINNIS METHOD GUIDE · NO. 05

People Can Change

When Hope Replaces Reality



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The people described in this guide, including Mara and Bill, are composites drawn from patterns across many clients. Names and identifying details have been changed or invented.

SECTION ONE

The Sentence That Sounds Like Hope

People can change.

People can change. I have watched it happen. I have watched people become better husbands, fathers, partners, friends. I have watched people recover capacities they thought were gone for good.

So this guide is not about whether people can change.

It is about something far more dangerous: building your own life around the hope that someone else eventually will.

Somewhere in your history there is probably a sentence that sounded hopeful. Every time a promise broke, the sentence was there, patient and reasonable, refusing to let the evidence in the room mean what it obviously meant.

People can change.

Eventually the sentence stopped describing the other person. It started organizing you. People can change. Therefore maybe one more chance.

That is the real subject of this guide. Not whether change is possible. It is whether there is evidence that it is actually happening. The subject is what happens the moment a true sentence about someone else quietly becomes the operating system for your own life.

"People can change. That does not mean you should organize your life around the possibility that they will."



SECTION TWO

Potential Quietly Replaces Evidence

The word doing the damage in the last section was therefore. It explains the logic of the sentence. It does not explain what actually happens, over years, inside a person who has been saying it on repeat.

What happens is a substitution. Potential quietly replaces evidence as the thing an entire life gets organized around.

It isn't only people can change, therefore. It is something closer to: people can change, so I should keep investing in this person. That is not a logical error. It is a decision about where to spend a limited resource, made on the strength of a prediction instead of a record. The real question is rarely whether change is possible. It is how much of your one life you are willing to wager on this person, given the evidence already in front of you.

Picture a woman, call her Mara, and the man who loved her, a composite drawn from more than one life this guide could hold. Mara lies. He tells himself, people can change. Mara manipulates a conversation until he is the

one apologizing. People can change. Mara disappears for a week without a word. People can change. She comes back warmer, sorrier, different. This time might be different, he thinks, and for a while it is.

Then it isn't.

By the third or fourth repetition, something happens that will feel familiar to a lot of readers. He does not keep believing because the evidence supports it. He keeps believing because stopping would mean admitting how much he has already spent.

"Working on yourself should not require ignoring what is repeatedly happening around you."

The man in this story was not naive. He was not foolish. He was responding, logically, to a sentence he had never examined. The sentence was true. What he did with it was not.

None of this is limited to romantic relationships. The same substitution shows up in a grown child explaining away a parent's cruelty, an employee absorbing a manager's broken promises, a friendship kept alive by potential rather than pattern. It is a way human beings misjudge reality, wherever there is a person, an institution, or a version of yourself you are still waiting to become.

"The sentence was true. The organization built around it wasn't."



SECTION THREE

The Sentence That Sounds Wise

Before looking at what the sentence costs, it's worth asking a different question: why does it get rewarded in the first place?

People can change is one of the most socially applauded sentences available. Say it out loud in almost any room and something predictable happens. People nod. They warm to you. You sound compassionate. Open minded. Forgiving. Optimistic. Emotionally mature.

Now say the more accurate sentence instead: I'm organizing my life around what this person has repeatedly done, not what they might someday do. Nobody applauds that one. It sounds guarded. Maybe even a little cold. And yet it is the healthier sentence by a wide margin.

This is part of what makes potential so hard to dislodge once it has replaced evidence. It isn't only a private habit of mind. It is reinforced from the outside, every time someone praises the patience, the loyalty, the hope. Friends who would never tolerate the same situation in their own lives will often cheer the belief on in yours.

Predictions are not evidence. They are bets. But a bet dressed as compassion is a very hard bet to walk away from, especially when the people around you keep telling you how admirable it is that you haven't cashed out yet.

"Predictions are not evidence. They are bets."



SECTION FOUR

People Are Not Broken. They Are Organized.

To understand why a sentence like people can change is able to take over a life, it helps to understand what organizes a life in the first place.

One of the biggest lies people believe about themselves is that they keep making the same mistake because they are defective. Usually they keep making it because they are still organized around solving a problem that no longer exists.

Many people arrive in therapy believing something is fundamentally wrong with them: too anxious, too avoidant, too needy, too controlling, as if the problem were a flaw in their character rather than a pattern in their history. The McInnis Method starts from a different premise: people are not broken. They are organized.

It may once have been an intelligent response to conditions the person had to navigate.

You are not broken. You may still be organized around a reality that has changed.

The problem is not that people once organized around a threat. The problem is that organization tends to outlast the threat that created it. Reality changes: the child grows up, the relationship ends, the dangerous parent is gone. But the organization built to survive it often stays exactly as it was, appearing across completely different areas of a life: in dating, at work, in the mirror. It is not several problems. It is one organization, expressing itself everywhere.

This reframe changes what therapy is for. It stops being a repair shop for broken people and becomes a place where organization is visible enough to be questioned, and reality is trustworthy enough to be returned to. Change rarely means becoming a different person. More often it means updating the organization that formed when you were younger, with fewer resources, still needing to survive something you no longer have to survive.

Here is the sentence this entire guide is trying to prove: an adaptation should be judged not only by what it once prevented, but by what it now produces.

"People are not broken. They are organized."

"Potential is not evidence."



SECTION FIVE

Adaptations Rarely Look Like Adaptations

This matters here for a specific reason: hope, patience, and loyalty are exactly the virtues that the belief likes to hide behind.

If adaptations looked like problems, they would be easy to spot and leave behind. They rarely do. Many wear the clothing of virtue. Goodness, responsibility, patience, loyalty, love: qualities nobody would tell you to abandon. That is exactly what makes them so durable. Nobody questions a pattern that looks like character.

Each can be a genuine strength. Each can also become organized around protection in ways that carry a cost.

What matters is not the behavior itself, but what it's doing. Goodness becomes self-abandonment when it requires disappearing. Self improvement becomes avoidance when it replaces reality testing. Waiting becomes an identity when it substitutes for participation. Belief in someone else's potential becomes a hiding place when it substitutes for looking honestly at what they've actually done.

I rarely hear, "The problem is that I keep abandoning myself." What I hear instead is, "People keep taking advantage of me."

So many capable, hardworking people stay stuck for years without recognizing it. They are not lacking virtue. They have virtue organized around an old threat, still running as though the threat were current. Recognizing the disguises adaptation wears is the necessary first step before the patterns in the next section can be seen clearly enough to change.

"Adaptations often disguise themselves as virtues."



SECTION SIX

Exceptions

It would be easy to describe the man from the last few sections as trapped by optimism. That is not quite what was happening. He was trapped by an unlimited supply of exceptions.

Protection can generate a new exception every time the evidence starts pointing somewhere costly.

Maybe this time. Maybe she's different. Maybe it was stress. Maybe it goes back to her childhood. Maybe she was scared. Maybe after graduation. Maybe after therapy. Maybe after the new job. Maybe after marriage. Maybe after kids. Maybe once things finally settle down. Maybe.

None of these were lies. That is exactly what made them work.

Hope does not replace reality all at once. It replaces it one exception at a time, until he is nearly the only person left who still believes it.

Most exceptions are at least partly true. Stress, childhood, and timing all influence behavior. The problem was never that any single exception was false. The problem is that a person can manufacture one for almost any behavior, indefinitely, and never be required to update the prediction underneath it.

Every time Mara offered a reason, he had an exception ready before she finished the sentence. He wasn't defending her. He was defending a prediction he'd made years earlier about who she was capable of becoming.

Each exception was a way of extending a bet that had already lost.

"Healthy judgment updates its conclusions as evidence accumulates. Adaptation keeps manufacturing exceptions instead."

"Potential is not evidence."



SECTION SEVEN

The Many Ways Potential Replaces Evidence

Organized around what a person is protecting rather than what they are diagnosed with, the same underlying process shows up wearing different faces. Each pattern below belongs to a different life. None belongs to a different process. In each one, potential has quietly outbid evidence, and an exception was standing by to make the trade feel reasonable.

Waiting for Another Person's Change

People can change, therefore I'll wait.

He organized his future around what someone else might eventually say, decide, or admit. Every plan waited on a phone that might never ring. His life got smaller, not for lack of options, but because he had handed his future to someone who had already stopped carrying it.

You knew the movie. You just kept hoping for a different ending.

"Another person's growth cannot become the condition for your own."

Goodness Becomes Self Abandonment

People can change, therefore I'll absorb this too.

He measured his worth by how much pain he could absorb. Every dispute became evidence that he needed to endure more, apologize sooner, disappear a little further into someone else's peace. He believed this was love. It was an adaptation: an old survival strategy slowly outrunning its usefulness.

"Goodness that requires your disappearance is no longer goodness."

Guilt Becomes an Organizing Principle

People can change, therefore this was my fault.

His first question after any disagreement was never What happened. It was What did I do wrong. Guilt had stopped functioning as information and become the lens he used to interpret everything. He apologized before he understood, repaired before he had reality, and mistook constant self-blame for being a good person.

"Feeling guilty is not proof that you have done something wrong."

Self Improvement Replaces Reality Testing

People can change, therefore I need to become more.

He assumed that if a relationship hurt, the fix was to become a better partner instead of asking whether the criticism was accurate. Growth had become a way of avoiding judgment about his environment. He grew and grew, and the discomfort never left, because it was never really about him.

"The desire to become a better person at all costs can become another adaptation."

Waiting to Begin

People can change, therefore I'll be ready later. I'll be perfect first.

Readiness does not always arrive before action. Sometimes action produces information that waiting cannot.

"Readiness is often the reward for action, not its prerequisite."

Measuring Change by the Wrong Yardstick

People can change, therefore my story isn't finished yet. One bad day doesn't erase the direction I'm headed.

This time the person she was waiting on was herself. She had believed for years that change meant an old pattern would stop showing up entirely, so every time it resurfaced, she read it as proof that nothing had really changed. The story wasn't foolish. It was adaptive, a version of herself her nervous system could survive believing, back when the truth underneath it could not be tolerated. What she needed wasn't better evidence. It was a different yardstick: not whether the old pattern appeared, but how quickly she recognized it, recovered from it, and repaired what it cost.

Sometimes a story persists not because the evidence supports it, but because the alternative feels harder to bear.

These are not six different kinds of people. They are one phenomenon wearing six different costumes: the same organizing instinct, dressed differently depending on which threat it originally had to survive.

One person in this section is different from the rest. We'll call him Bill. His belief that people can change turned out to be correct, not because he was more patient, but because the other person's actual behavior eventually matched the hope. That distinction, between what someone might do and what they have already done, is the difference the rest of this guide is built around.



SECTION EIGHT

What Hope Has Already Cost

Every prediction costs something. Not always dramatically. Most of the time it costs quietly, in a currency that doesn't show up on a receipt until years later.

Sometimes it costs a date spent explaining someone else's behavior instead of living your own life. Sometimes it costs the friendship that didn't get attention, the career move that kept getting postponed, the version of yourself who might have met somebody healthy in the time you spent waiting. Hope has an opportunity cost, and none of these losses announce themselves. They simply do not happen, quietly, in the background, for as long as the prediction is still being paid for.

Picture the ledger nobody keeps. Two years of weekends spent managing someone else's crisis instead of building a life. The friend who stopped calling after the fifth cancellation. The job in another city, turned down, because leaving would have meant admitting the bet had failed. None of these register on any single day. They register all at once, later, when somebody finally adds the column.

None of this is a verdict on the man who paid it. He was not foolish for hoping. He was paying, slowly, while the hope continued to look reasonable, the way any bet does right up until somebody finally counts what it cost to keep making it.

Years later, most people don't regret believing someone could change. They regret everything that belief quietly asked them not to become while they waited.

The sentence was rarely dishonest. The bill came from what people built on top of it. People can change. But should you invest decades of your life to see it? Maybe. Maybe not.

"Hope has an opportunity cost."



SECTION NINE

The Adaptation Is Not the Enemy

None of the patterns in the previous section are moral failures. Each began as a solution, often a remarkably intelligent one, to a problem faced by someone with far fewer resources than they have now. The adaptation running someone's marriage today was usually built by a kid just trying to make it through one family. What is in a child's power other than keeping the hope that their parents can change?

Attacking the protection usually gives it another reason to stay. Understanding what it protected makes it possible to ask whether it still belongs.

A more useful question replaces it: not Why do I do this, but What is this producing now? An adaptation that once prevented rejection may now be preventing intimacy. One that once prevented abandonment may now be preventing rest. The strategy hasn't changed; the environment has.

Honor the intelligence of the adaptation, and find out whether the conditions it was built for are still present.

Don't apologize for learning to swim in the water you were thrown into. Get out when reality no longer requires swimming.

This single sentence reorganizes the entire task of therapy. It moves the work away from interrogating a person's character and toward auditing a strategy's current cost. The question changes from, "Am I doing something wrong?" to, "Is this still working, and for what?"

The adaptation was never the enemy. For a long time, it was the ally. The task now is not to defeat it. It is to thank it honestly, then ask whether it is still needed in the same form.

"An adaptation should be judged not only by what it once prevented, but by what it now produces."



SECTION TEN

What Real Change Actually Looks Like

Remember Bill, introduced a few sections back. His belief that people can change turned out to be warranted, not because he was more patient but because the other person's actual behavior eventually matched the hope. He is worth returning to. He didn't just promise. He changed, observably and repeatedly, in ways that could be tracked instead of merely hoped for. The difference between Bill and everyone else was never optimism. It was evidence.

This distinction is the only reliable way to tell a real therefore from a false one. Hope organized around potential is a guess about the future. Trust organized around demonstrated behavior is a response to the present. None of this asks you to stop believing people can change. It asks you to stop granting credit for change that hasn't happened yet.

Many people measure change by absence, whether the old pattern ever appears again. Measured this way, change nearly always fails, because old organization rarely disappears completely. It becomes quieter, shorter, weaker, but it doesn't vanish. Waiting for it to vanish before believing anything has changed guarantees permanent disappointment.

One useful measure is not whether the old pattern appears, but what happens after it does. Recognition, recovery, repair, and return to reality can all provide evidence that something is changing.

This is also the test worth applying to anyone whose potential you've been organizing your life around. Not are they sorry. Not do they mean it this time. But is the gap between the old pattern and the return to reality actually getting shorter, over time you can point to. If it is, that's change, and it deserves trust. If not, therefore has nothing left to stand on.

People often want a scoreboard that reads perfect.

This doesn't require becoming a different person. It requires becoming someone who returns to reality faster, who catches the old organization earlier and interrupts it before it finishes running. Accountability increases; self condemnation doesn't have to. Repair changes a relationship more than any explanation could, because it demonstrates the new pattern instead of describing it.

Not every version of this is as easy to see as Mara's. Picture a friend who never lies or disappears, who just goes quiet for a few days after a disagreement, then reappears as if nothing happened. There's no single moment to point to, only a pattern, exactly what the four verbs were built to catch. Ask honestly: is the quiet getting shorter? If nothing is shortening, potential is still doing the work evidence should be doing.

Real change is rarely dramatic. It is a shortening. The gap between the old response and the return to reality gets smaller every time, until one day the gap is small enough that almost nobody, including the person living it, would call it the old pattern anymore.

"Real change is measured less by whether the old pattern appears than by how quickly you recover from it."

"Potential is not evidence."



SECTION ELEVEN

Development Is the Recovery of Capacity

Protection can make a capacity harder to access under particular conditions. The important question is whether that capacity disappeared or survived somewhere else.

Development often means making existing capacities available in more of your life.

None of these capacities return all at once, or because a person decided, in a single moment, to be different. They return the way any capacity returns after long disuse, gradually, awkwardly, with more relapses than anyone would like. A person practicing receiving love will still deflect a compliment ten times before accepting the eleventh. That isn't proof development has failed. It's what development looks like while it's happening.

When was the last time you let someone help you without immediately calculating how to pay them back?

The question is where these capacities are already available and what conditions make them easier to use. Where can you already receive help? With whom can you say no? Where does uncertainty become tolerable?

Symptom relief is usually where therapy starts and stops. The McInnis Method aims underneath that: restore the capacity, and the symptoms often move on their own.

What changes last, and underneath everything else, is identity. A person does not first believe they are someone who receives love and then start receiving it. They receive it first, unevenly and uncertainly, and belief follows the practice. Capacity comes back before identity catches up.

Development often means making existing capacities available in more of your life.



SECTION TWELVE

The Future Is Built One Action at a Time

Sometimes protection makes an internal state feel like a prerequisite for action: confidence first, certainty first, no guilt first.

When action has earned its place, a small real-world step can provide information that preparation cannot. You do not always discover the right path before walking it. Sometimes you discover more by taking a step and seeing what actually happens.

You don't get the certainty first and the courage second. You get maybe one lousy inch of courage, you use it, and the certainty shows up late, acting like it should have been there all along.

None of this is a license to act recklessly or ignore genuine caution. It's about noticing when preparation has quietly become a way of avoiding the very thing it claims to prepare for. The future gets built the way anything durable does: one real, specific action, taken in actual life, repeated until the old organization no longer determines your next move.

"Confidence is often the result of action rather than its prerequisite."



CLOSING

People Can Change

People do change. Usually not all at once, but through the shortening gap between the old pattern and the return to reality.

The man who kept organizing his life around the belief that people can change did eventually leave. Not because he stopped believing it, but because he finally organized his decision around what she had actually done instead of what she might still do.

Those same words have quietly kept people in relationships that were ending them: marriages with nothing left, friendships that only ran in one direction, careers that should have closed a chapter years earlier.

This guide was never really about whether people can change. They can. Sometimes they do.

It is about noticing the moment your belief that they might starts costing you the life you actually have.

Every pattern in this guide looks different on the surface. Guilt is not the same as perfectionism, caretaking is not the same as waiting. But underneath the costumes, they are the same event: a real threat once required a real adaptation, and the adaptation outlasted the threat. A real hope once required a real belief, and the belief outlasted the evidence.

People are not broken. They are organized. So are you. Nobody in this guide needed to be fixed. Each of them needed reality to become more trustworthy than the adaptation, or the belief, that had been protecting them from it, one recognition, one recovery, one repair, one action at a time.

The question worth asking is no longer, "Can they change?" It is, "What has this belief already cost, and am I willing to keep paying it?" Don't trust the promise. Trust the shrinking gap.

Therapy is often less about discovering who you were supposed to be than noticing what still organizes you, what capacities are already available, and what you want to build through what you do now.

At bottom, this was never only a guide about relationships. It was about a much older problem: how a person decides what counts as reality. Every pattern in this guide made the same quiet substitution, giving more weight to what someone might someday do than to what they have already, repeatedly done.

If you have been reading this and felt both things at once, the danger of waiting on someone else's potential and the fear that someone you love might be waiting on yours, you have arrived at the most honest place this guide can land. Potential is not evidence, in either direction.

"People can change. Until they do, organize your life around what they repeatedly do, not what you repeatedly hope."
