

What fuels our desire to create change? What inspires women to make an impact in the lives of others?

In Change Makers, 20 inspirational women share what drives their vision to serve others, create businesses and enrich lives in their communities and around the globe.

You'll be energised by their passion for creating change and moved by stories of loss, renewal and courage. You'll discover that transformational life lessons can appear disguised as tests and adversity, but somehow, life is always working for us.

It's time to shake things up and challenge the status quo; it's time to create the change you desire to see in the world!

It's time to be a

Change Maker!

CHANGE MAKERS

Change Maker Press

Change Maker Press Presents





HANNAH AIREY

Betrayal is an interesting feeling. It blindsides you. It threatens to steal your self-worth as you are left wondering how you allowed it to enter your life. It is often accompanied by shame, blame, anger and grief. It can tear you apart and cause your heart to wince with pain. At least, this was my experience.

Many of us have struggled through relationship break downs and the darkness that it usually brings one or other of the people involved, sometimes both. I have chosen to share with you my story, as this is pivotal to where I am now and the journey to arrive here.

My nickname as a child was Mouse. This was an apt description of a child who was quiet and shy. Someone who would often be found asleep behind the couch or would gently blend into the background when people came round home.

I would often bring home friends who would need food, a bath and de-lousing. I guess I've always wanted to help people.

It wasn't until I was a teenager that I started coming out of my shell, usually with the help of alcohol. For many years this vice accompanied me as I navigated my way through life. It masked the mouse.

I was only 22 when I married a man I had met in Earl's Court, London. I knew I was too young; he was eight years older and wouldn't take no for an answer. Five years later I left him, the day Princess Diana died.

My plan upon returning to Christchurch was to go to Asia after spending some time with my family. Within two months, I met another man. Little did I know that he would become my greatest lesson, my nemesis and the person who would take from me the very essence of who I was.

This man was charismatic and charming, someone who was used to getting his way. He was a chef by trade but owned a nightclub when I met him. Before I knew it, I was swept up into a world of hedonism. A far cry from my life in Melbourne! My plan to travel to Asia was derailed when he decided to trade his nightclub days in for a restaurant which was slightly more conducive to having a relationship. I decided to stay and see where this took me.

When he opened his restaurant, I offered to help out as I had had some prior experience. We worked very hard, and we partied very hard! Nine years later, I was still working in our businesses, albeit part-time with a 3-year-old and an 18-month-old.

Our relationship showed signs of strain. I put it down to the hospitality industry, the hours he worked and having a young family.

It wasn't long before the truth came out. He had been having an affair with our bar manager. A love nest had been set up in the building next to the restaurant. My world came crashing down. There hadn't been just this affair, there had been numerous affairs, with friends and friends of friends, often at the same time – in the same room!

Within a short amount of time, I lost my job, my business, my income,

my house and most of my friends. I retreated from life, and I was often extremely tearful. I ended up on anti-depressants, after experiencing panic attacks for the first time.

Fortunately, when I was pregnant with my daughter, I had started to consider a modality with more purpose and meaning in it. I began to learn reflexology and studied anatomy and physiology through correspondence. This study continued to be my mainstay during a time that sent me spiralling downwards.

During my studies, I researched stress, anxiety and depression and how it affects the body and the mind. One day I came across laughter being used therapeutically and this resonated with me – I hadn't laughed in ages! In February 2007, I came across a magazine with 'Laugh Yourself Healthy!' on the front cover. Dr Kataria, the founder of Laughter Yoga, was coming to New Zealand to train people to start community laughter clubs. I was convinced this was going to be a panacea of some sort. I booked a local community hall before I went to the training and the very next weekend I started the first Laughter Club in the South Island and second only in NZ.

In those days, my children would be picked up by their father at 9 am Sunday morning. It was often a distressing time with upset children. I would have to collect myself and put on that 'mask' and get to the Laughter Club by 11 am. I had to be there and accountable – there was often a queue of people waiting.

They were hard days, but what I noticed was by the end of the 45-minute session, I was a different person. I literally chose how I wanted to be, and every cell in my body followed suit. I was approached to take laughter workshops nationwide into corporate organisations, retirement villages, prisons, schools, drug and alcohol addiction units and mental health support groups. It was amazing to share laughter like this; the effect on others was transformational.

Life was still hard on many levels. I often didn't have enough money to meet basic needs. At times I wasn't sure I would have enough food for my children. I remember I couldn't afford a pair of shoes, the ones I had had holes in them. I was embarrassed in case anyone noticed, to the point I compromised the way I walked so no one could see the soles of my shoes. My self-esteem was pretty low.

Within seven months of taking laughter yoga, I came off anti-depressants. Had I been aware that I could increase the levels of serotonin and endorphins myself by laughing, instead of taking synthetic serotonin, I definitely would have chosen laughter.

I devoured research on how to bio-hack my body, how to change thought patterns and learned the work of Martin Seligman, other positive psychology models and mindfulness. I treated myself as a guinea pig. My psyche and body changed. I was astounded. I knew that if I could change, then surely I could help others? One of my favourite quotes by Wayne Dyer is, 'When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.'

Amazing things started happening. It seemed as though I was sent people I needed, just at the right time – synchronicity at play. When something terrible happened, I didn't react. I waited, gave it space and something good would happen! An example of this was when my car literally blew up. I was faced with freaking out, which seemed like an excellent option at the time, or not. I chose not and incredibly I got given a car (yes, really) by my next-door neighbours. They taught me how to receive. The goodness and kindness of people blew me away.

I formed a company and started developing wellbeing material to take into organisations, combining everything I knew. I found I had a knack of translating research and information that could be used by all walks of life.

I founded the Lotus Community Wellbeing Trust, which offered communities and support groups workshops at a discounted rate. I also trained others to set up Laughter Clubs around the country.

On Tuesday, 22 February 2011, I was given another opportunity to put my tools into action. I was working from home when a massive earthquake struck. I clung onto a wall in a door frame, as parts of the house fell around me. The house was situated just .3 km from the epicentre of New Zealand's deadliest earthquake.

That day 185 people were killed. Four suburbs were wiped out, and the central city was cordoned off for 2.5 years. 80% of our city was demolished, communities disbanded and lives changed forever.

I stayed in 20 different homes in four months, carrying pillows and sleeping bags in the back of my car. A few years later we were forced to look at alternative ways of living again when we lived in a friend's partially demolished house for six months. Actually, it was just a room, for three of us and two cats – it was safe, but there was no power, water or sewerage. Here was another opportunity for a life experiment and a story for another time.

In the months after the quakes business was slow – people were in survival mode, trying to function on a daily basis. We were affected by what psychosocial recovery models soon called the 'double blow'. The unknowing of when the next aftershock was going to hit, coupled with the frustrating red tape of insurance pay-outs.

Companies had employees on suicide watch. There was a tale of two cities where people who lived in the western suburbs were relatively unscathed while people from the eastern suburbs were still living in a garage four years on. Organisations were melting pots of emotions, stress and mental health issues. My focus began to be on growing empathy, compassion and positivity within the culture of

organisations.

I came across a grassroots community organisation my sister was volunteering for, which had formed as a result of the quakes. Gap Filler was a community response to the earthquakes and the loss of amenities and connection to our city. I was drawn to work with them as the power of their projects was incredible. They evolved by communities coming together, using recycled materials and inviting people to return to parts of the city to play, to connect with people – to experience things in a new way. No libraries? Let's make a book fridge. No dance studios or night clubs? Let's make a sprung dance floor and convert a coin-operated washing machine into a dance box. No community centre venue for live music and shows? Let's build a pavilion out of 2,500 pallets, built by 250 volunteers over six weeks.

Hope was given.

In 2012, I was fortunate to attend a masterclass in London with Nic Marks, best known for his work on happiness and wellbeing and subsequently the Happy Planet Index and the Five Ways to Wellbeing.

I had used the Five Ways as a framework in all my material; in fact, a laughter workshop uses all five! It seemed fitting that I become a practitioner of Nic's Happiness at Work Survey tool. It's been incredible watching the world take on the Five Ways. Closer to home, the Mental Health Foundation (NZ) use it, and one of my roles at Gap Filler was to weave the actions into the projects.

I feel very privileged to have worked and studied with leaders in their fields on the fringe of their rise to global fame – Dr Kataria, Laughter Yoga, Nic Marks with the Five Ways to Wellbeing, and more recently Wim Hof, otherwise known as The Iceman and founder of the Wim Hof Method.

In 2016, I was introduced to this method. It taps into the primal mechanisms of the mind and body by using cold exposure, mindset and the breath. I recoiled at the thought of getting into ice-cold water. I have Raynaud's Syndrome and thought maybe I could retrain my circulatory system and control my inflammatory response. I was right.

Having worked with the breath and feel-good hormones for years, I was intrigued to work with the stress hormones, breath and mindset in a different way. I started using the method regularly. It brought with it a calmness, peace and strength I never realised I had. In 2017, I was fortunate to be one of 4 women to participate in Wim's advanced training in Melbourne – along with 40 men! I now take Breathe and Chill Out workshops and am a proud owner of two chest freezers, which act as ice baths. I am astounded by the power of my mind and breath in allowing my body to withstand the cold.

This method, along with laughter yoga and the positive psychology models I use as the cornerstones in my life, has served me through many more times of adversity. I am incredibly resilient, and although things continue to happen around me, I cope better.

Over the years, my children's lives with their dad have not been easy. They have witnessed dysfunction at a high level, which has hit the media on more than one occasion with their father being centre stage.

They both know that life can be hard and at times have felt like it has failed them. They know that they have a choice in how they react to things that happen. My son, in particular, has at times, experienced debilitating anxiety, but they have their tools to support them. If only other children and people had the opportunity to have these tools. Youth suicide continues to grow globally. In NZ alone it has doubled in the last ten years. We can't protect our families from things that happen, but it's imperative that tools are shared so they can recover

to the best of their ability.

On 15 March 2019, a man walked into a mosque 300m away from where I was and killed 51 people. The sheer shock that something so brutal and cruel could happen in our country, never mind the city in which I live, was unbelievable. For many, the sounds of sirens and helicopters triggered PTSD caused by the earthquakes and people were transported right back into that state of fear.

The Muslim community and their incredible capacity to forgive this man is forever in my mind. I have done my own work on forgiveness, and it took some doing! It doesn't mean you have to condone someone's actions, but unless you forgive, you'll never move forward.

The day after the shooting, I found myself in the hospital with my son, who had come off his bicycle; my father was in the ward above us with a chest infection. The hospital was full of people who were awaiting word of whether their loved ones were alive or dead. I'll never forget their pain and disbelief, as well as their composure and calmness at such a time.

The challenges I have faced personally have led me to the place I am today. If people are empowered to be accountable for their wellbeing, with the knowledge that they can access so much inside of themselves, they can increase their happiness and how they function in the world – at work, home and in the community.

The impact of the work that I do has been humbling. Whether it is bodywork, breathwork or wellbeing initiatives, the transformation is undeniable. We need to share our stories, our challenges, our vulnerability – these create our biggest opportunity for change.

A client once said to me after one of our workshops, 'Thank you; you have given me permission to be myself and to be honest. You have

saved my life.'

Another said, 'You don't even know how good you are. When I got back in the car, I had tears of relief. You gave me hope that things might get better for me. There are no words.'

Often I'm rewarded as much as the recipient! Last week I took a laughter workshop for a group of young adults in their 20s with varying disabilities. I didn't realise that 3 of them were blind. Within minutes they were engaged and laughing, and it was so profound. The two other carers helped me, and we took the blind women's hands and showed them the actions and that was all they needed. It was such an incredible hour!

People need hope; they need to know that they are stronger than they think and yes, bad things happen, but they do not define us, and we can learn from them. Had I not gone through everything I have, I wouldn't be in the position to share what I can.

A few years ago, I had the good fortune to reconnect with my now business partner, Jo Fife. Jo's background is in nurturing businesses to grow and to look at how people prefer to think and communicate. I knew immediately that we could have something very special to offer if we combined our experiences, skills and talents. Together we have been developing and facilitating workshops, wellbeing programmes, initiatives and online wellbeing challenges. We collaborate with a wide range of incredible experts in their fields to bring the most powerful and up to date research and ideas into the workplace. We are fortunate to be doing what we love.

Our passions have enabled us to make a further difference in people's lives. Just a couple of weeks ago after a workshop, one participant approached us nearly in tears. She had had one of those 'Aha' moments when she had become aware of her part in some of the

things that weren't going so well in her workplace. She was now empowered to make some necessary changes.

If we are to succeed in life truly, we need to be knowledgeable about how our bodies and minds work. We need to understand each other, communicate, have empathy, compassion and respect. None of us is immune to challenges, but all of us have the choice in how we affect those around us and ultimately how we are in ourselves.

About the Author



Hannah Airey is director of Workplace Wellbeing and works with organisations to transform and inspire positive workplace culture, by implementing bespoke holistic wellbeing initiatives. With over 13 years' experience in developing strategies to increase mental and physical wellness and promoting positivity, empowering people to use what they already have within themselves on a primal level is what Hannah is most passionate about.

Hannah has a diploma in anatomy and physiology, is qualified in a number of holistic modalities and is founder and chair of Lotus Community Wellbeing Trust, dedicated to delivering wellbeing workshops to the community.

Website: www.lotustrust.org.nz and www.hannah-airey.com

Email: Hannah@workplacewellbeing.co.nz and hannah@hannah-airey.com