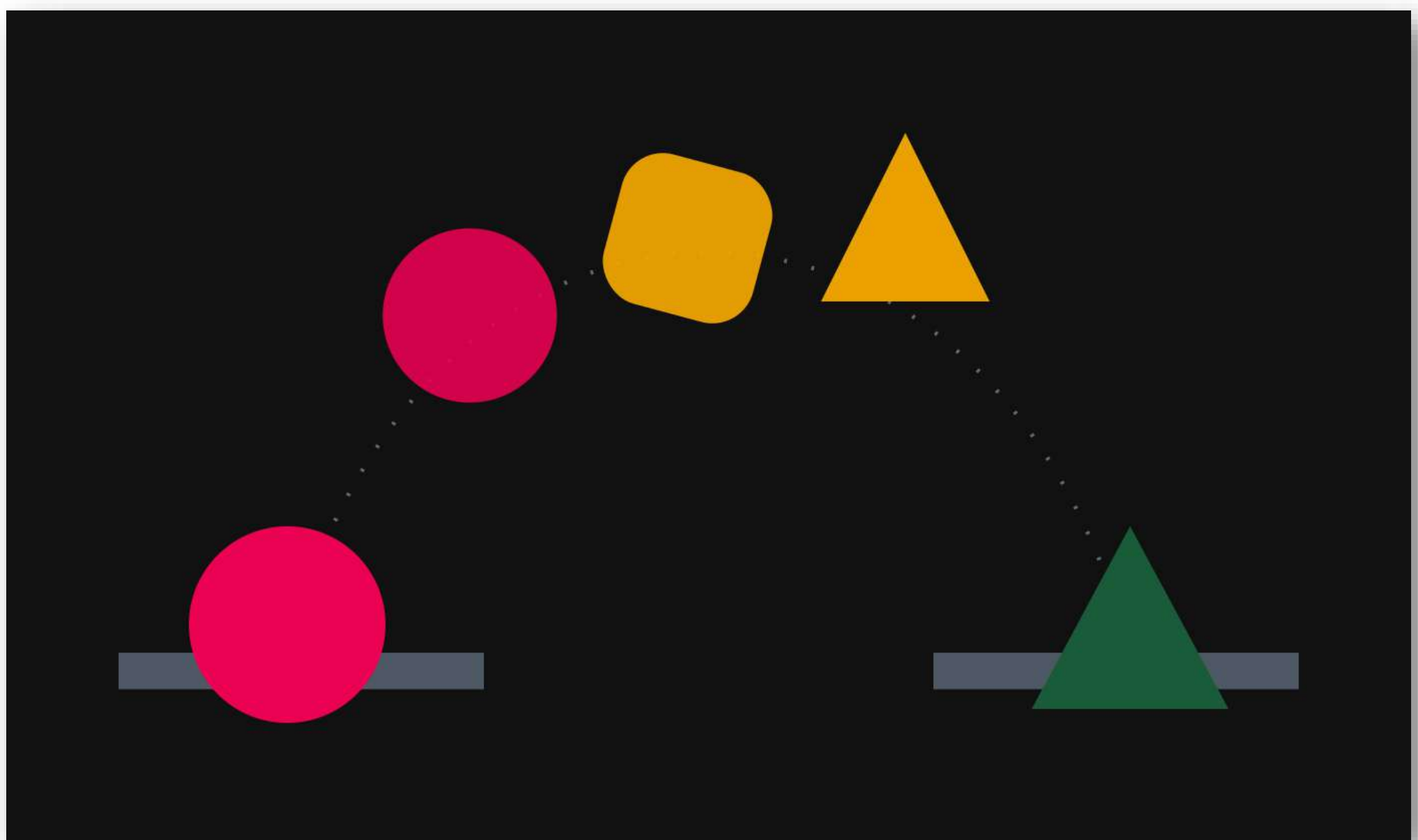


THE FERTILE VOID

The psychology of knowing
what needs to change - and
choosing not to change it



There is a particular kind of stuck that has nothing to do with not knowing what to do. The person in front of you can name the problem precisely. They can describe the decision they need to make, the conversation they need to have, the habit they need to break. What they cannot do - for months, sometimes for years - is act on it. This isn't ignorance. It's something else, and it has a name in several different psychological traditions, each of which sees a different part of it clearly.

The Gap Has a Name - Several, In Fact

Health and social psychology call this the intention-behaviour gap: the well-documented finding that forming a genuine intention to change predicts only a modest fraction of whether the change actually happens. Meta-analytic estimates suggest intentions account for roughly 30% of the variance in subsequent behaviour (Sheeran & Webb, cited in Ganschow, Zebel, van Gelder & Cornet, 2024), and across health-related intentions specifically, roughly half of people who genuinely intend to change never follow through (Ganschow et al., 2024). A 2025 methodological review in the British Journal of Health Psychology argues that the gap isn't a fixed trait but fluctuates within the same person from day to day, which is itself revealing: the void isn't a stable deficiency, it's a recurring threshold people cross and fail to cross at different moments (Jekauc et al., cited in the British Journal of Health Psychology, 2025).

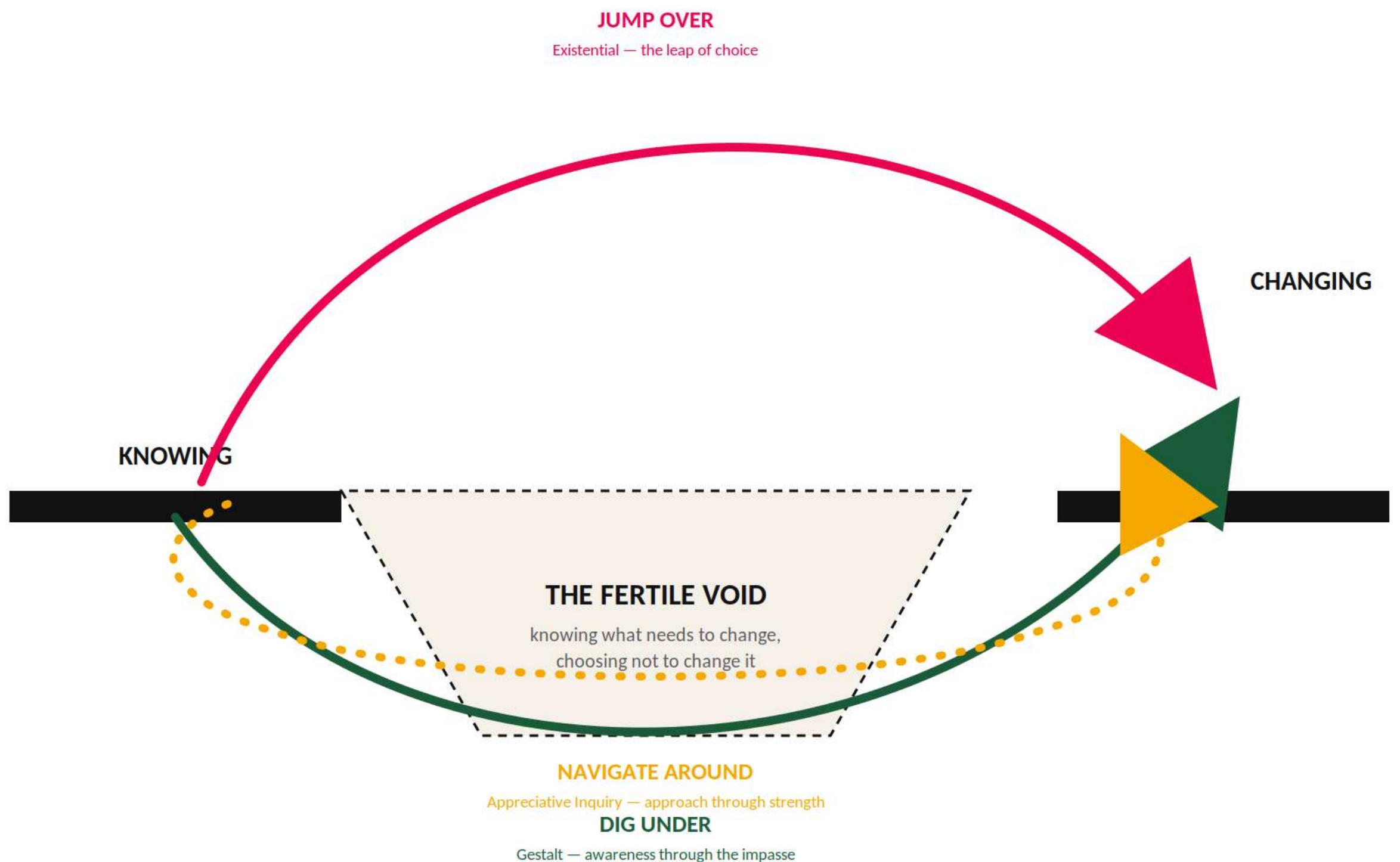
A useful distinction, drawn from recent applied psychology writing, is between an intention, a reason, and an excuse. *"Reasons offer clarity. They reveal what's getting in your way: fear, exhaustion, overwhelm, uncertainty, lack of structure, competing priorities, or emotional discomfort"* (Psychology Today, 2025). Excuses look similar on the surface but perform a different function - they protect comfort rather than explain a genuine obstacle. Telling the two apart is often the actual work of the void.

The Void Itself Is Not the Problem

Gestalt therapy offers the most useful reframe here, because it doesn't treat this stuck place as a failure to be fixed quickly. Fritz Perls described a stage in the change process he called the impasse - the point at which old patterns of coping no longer work but a new way of being hasn't yet emerged (Perls, cited in Gestalt Therapy Institute).

What lies at the centre of the impasse, in Perls' language, is a void - and rather than treating it as empty or as something to escape immediately, Gestalt names it the fertile void: "the void he thought to be empty and dark starts to become a fertile void" (Perls, in Gestalt Therapy Verbatim). It is described as a state of "no-thing-ness" in which "this state of existence itself being primary" allows a "renewed contact with the actual - not the conceptual" (Van Deusen, cited in Gestalt Therapy Institute).

This matters practically: the instinct to rush someone out of indecision - to fill the void with a plan, a deadline, a piece of advice - often recreates exactly the pattern that produced the stuckness in the first place. The Gestalt view is that awareness of how you are stuck is itself the therapeutic move, not a delay before the real work starts (Perls, in Gestalt Therapy Verbatim).



Three ways to work with the void, drawn from three different psychological traditions

Three Ways Through - Not One

No single modality has a monopoly on unsticking someone. Below are seven distinct routes, each grounded in a different tradition, each suited to a different kind of stuckness.

Dig Under: the Gestalt route

This route goes underneath the surface indecision to contact what's actually being avoided - an emotion, an unmet need, an old pattern of retreat that once made sense and no longer does. Gestalt calls interruptions to this process "contact boundary disturbances" - habitual responses, such as retroflection or avoidance, that persist "even though the original circumstances under which the disturbance may have had adaptive value... are not present" (Clarkson, cited in Gestalt Cycle of Experience literature). In coaching or mentoring terms, this means slowing down rather than speeding up: asking what is actually being felt in the body right now, what is being avoided in this exact moment, rather than jumping straight to an action plan. The route through is awareness, not analysis.

Navigate Around: the Appreciative Inquiry route

Appreciative Inquiry takes a different route entirely: rather than confronting the block directly, it approaches change through what is already working. Developed by Cooperrider and Whitney, the 4-D cycle - Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny - begins not with what's wrong but with "appreciating and valuing" existing strengths, then envisioning what could be built from them (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, cited in A Guide to Appreciative Inquiry Research Design, 2025). The underlying premise is that "organizations move toward what they study" (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003) - and the same holds for individuals. If someone is stuck facing their gap directly, asking instead "when has something like this gone well before, and what made that possible?" can build enough momentum to approach the void from its edge rather than its centre.

Jump Over: the existential route

The existential tradition doesn't try to dissolve the void or route around it. It treats indecision itself as a meaningful act - and confronts the person with their own freedom to choose, right now, without first resolving every uncertainty.

Existential coaching is defined as helping clients "deal with their existential questions... by transforming their mindset regarding freedom of choice, the human condition and finitude" (New School of Psychotherapy & Counselling, cited in a 2024 qualitative study of existential coaching practice). A 2024 study of nine existential coaches found this reframing of freedom and responsibility to be central to how the approach actually works in practice, not just its theoretical framing (Existential coaching study, Coaching: An International Journal, 2024). Where this differs sharply from the other two routes: it does not wait for clarity, comfort, or evidence of readiness. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" names the specific self-deception of pretending a choice isn't yours to make - and existential work confronts that pretence directly, treating the leap itself, taken before all the fear is resolved, as the point (Sartre, cited in Jean-Paul Sartre: Existentialism, Freedom, and the Human Condition).

Result-Focused: the solution-focused route

Where the other routes spend time understanding the block, the solution-focused route deliberately doesn't. Developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg at the Brief Family Therapy Center, this approach is built on "solution-building rather than problem-solving," exploring "current resources and future hopes rather than present problems and past causes" (de Shazer et al., cited in Cambridge Core, 2018). Its signature tool is the miracle question - inviting someone to describe, in concrete detail, what life looks like the morning after the problem has simply vanished - which a 2021 controlled study found was more effective than problem-focused questioning at reducing negative affect and building self-efficacy (Neipp et al., Journal of Family Therapy, 2021). Scaling questions ("on a scale of 0 to 10, where are you today?") generated more concrete action steps than either the miracle or exception questions in the same study - making this route especially useful once someone can already picture where they want to be, but needs a next, smaller step rather than more analysis of how they got stuck.

The Somatic Route

The somatic route works on the premise that the void isn't only a cognitive or emotional event - it's held in the body, often before it's available to conscious thought. Richard Strozzi-Heckler's foundational text on somatic coaching argues that "the dominant epistemology of our times reduces learning and knowing fundamentally to exercises of a disembodied intellect," and that sustainable change requires working with the body as "the center of our lived experience" rather than treating it as separate from decision-making (Strozzi-Heckler, The Art of Somatic Coaching).

In practice this means noticing what the body is already doing in the face of the stuck decision - bracing, collapsing, holding the breath - and using embodied practice, not just conversation, to rehearse a different physical response. A 2026 industry analysis notes that "embodied rehearsal, where leaders physically practice new responses to familiar triggers, creates behavioural shifts that persist under pressure in ways that cognitive insights alone often do not" (Forbes Councils, 2026). This route is especially suited to voids that show up as a physical sensation before they show up as a sentence - a tightness, a fatigue, a bracing - where talking about the block hasn't been enough to move it.

The Psychodynamic Route

The psychodynamic route asks a different question again: not what is the person avoiding, or what do they want instead, but what unconscious purpose does staying stuck actually serve? Psychodynamic theory holds that "an individual's behaviour and feelings are strongly influenced by unconscious aspects of the mind, often originating in early experiences," and that defence mechanisms - repression, rationalisation, denial, projection - exist specifically to keep certain material out of conscious awareness because it would otherwise provoke anxiety (Animas Coaching, 2025; drawing on Freud and Anna Freud's foundational work on defence mechanisms). Applied to organisational and coaching contexts, research has found that below-the-surface motivations and immature defence mechanisms can directly predict resistance to change, mediated by how secure someone's underlying self-evaluation is (Hunter, cited in London Metropolitan University research repository). This route is slower than the others and usually requires a properly trained practitioner rather than a coach working outside their scope - but where the same pattern of stuckness recurs across many unrelated situations in someone's life, it's often a sign that something below conscious awareness, not the specific decision in front of them, is what's actually being protected.

A Route Worth Adding: Motivational Interviewing

If there's one modality conspicuous by its absence above, it's this one - because motivational interviewing was built for exactly this phenomenon. Developed by William Miller and Stephen Rollnick, MI treats ambivalence not as a client's failure but as the normal condition of anyone facing meaningful change: "it is normal for people to feel two ways about making an important change in their lives... client ambivalence is a roadblock to change, not a lack of knowledge or skills" (Miller & Rollnick, cited in NCBI, 2021).

Rather than arguing someone out of their stuckness, MI works by eliciting "change talk" - helping the person voice their own reasons for change in their own words, since research consistently shows that self-generated reasons predict follow-through far better than reasons supplied by someone else (SAMHSA Advisory, drawing on Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Crucially, MI abandoned the idea of "rolling with resistance" in its most recent edition, on the grounds that framing a client as "resistant" quietly blames them for a normal part of the change process (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). For anyone sitting with a client's stated ambivalence - the classic "I know, but..." - this is often the most directly applicable route of all seven.

Choosing the Right Route

- **If the stuckness feels emotional and unnamed** - a felt sense of dread or heaviness without a clear story - dig under. Awareness, not action, is the move.
- **If the stuckness feels like fear of failure or fear of the unknown** - a story about what could go wrong - navigate around. Build from evidence of what has already worked.
- **If someone can already picture the destination but not the next step** - result-focused. Use the miracle question or a scaling question to generate a concrete, smaller action.
- **If the stuckness shows up in the body before it shows up in words** - a bracing, a fatigue, a held breath - take the somatic route. Rehearse the new physical response, not just the new thought.
- **If the same pattern of stuckness recurs across many unrelated situations** - psychodynamic. Something below conscious awareness may be doing real protective work, and it usually needs a properly trained practitioner to work with safely.
- **If the person openly says "I know, but..."** - motivational interviewing. Don't argue the other side of their own ambivalence for them; draw out their own reasons for change instead.
- **If the stuckness has already been named, understood, and discussed at length** - if more reflection is starting to become its own form of avoidance - jump over. At some point, insight has done all it can do, and only the choice itself is left.

These are not mutually exclusive, and they are not always sequential. Someone can spend real time digging under a block, gather enough self-understanding to navigate around it using their own past strengths, and still, at the final point, have to jump - because no amount of preparation removes the fact that the decision has to be made by them, now, without full certainty.

The Takeaway

Knowing what needs to change and not changing it is not a character flaw, and it is not usually solved by more information - the person in the void typically already has the information. What it often needs is the right route for the specific shape of that particular void: digging under it when the block is emotional, navigating around it when the block is fear framed as uncertainty, building forward from a result-focused question when the destination is already clear, working through the body when the block lives there first, going deeper when the same pattern keeps recurring, naming the ambivalence directly when someone is already saying "I know, but...", or simply jumping when insight has done all it can do and only the choice itself remains.

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