

Further Thoughts about Personal Control

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

I was very touched by the responses I received to last month's article "Chance Meetings" in which I described an incident that involved professional football player Donald Driver of the Green Bay Packers when he was a teenager. As many of you recall, while Driver was stealing a car he crashed into a vehicle driven by an elderly woman who was backing out of her driveway. Driver fled the scene, but something prompted him to return to check on the health of the elderly woman. She was not injured, but by then the police were turning the corner towards her house.

The elderly woman, Grandma Johnson, looked at Driver and said, "Go sit on my porch." Without knowing why, he complied with her request. When the police approached, she told them that the person who rammed her car had fled. When they asked who was the teenager sitting on the porch swing, she responded, "Oh, that's just my grandson."

When the police left, Grandma Johnson yelled at Driver, "Get in this house. Why do you do this, young man? You could be doing so much more with your life!"

As I detailed in last month's article, this chance encounter was a major turning point in Driver's life and he went on to be successful both on and off the playing field. I used his story as a catalyst to capture several key features of resilience, one of which was the concept of "personal control." I emphasized that Driver made the decision to turn around and check on the well-being of Grandma Johnson, a woman he did not know. He chose to stop running. The words "made the decision" and "chose" are significant since they represent the very essence of personal control.

A number of people reading last month's article as well as other pieces I have written about personal control asked me to elaborate on this concept. I have had similar requests from individuals attending my workshops. In our latest collaboration, a book focusing on resilience in adults that will be released this fall, Dr. Sam Goldstein and I highlight the concept of personal control, assigning it a central role in leading a resilient lifestyle. Thus, I welcome the opportunity to share some additional

thoughts about what is entailed in achieving personal control. It is my hope that these thoughts will prompt you to reflect upon your life.

Personal Control, Resilience, and Health

One of the main characteristics of resilient people is that they focus on and act upon what they have control over, devoting little time or energy to factors that are beyond their sphere of influence. The courage to take responsibility and ownership for our actions requires that we recognize that “we are the authors of our own lives.” Resilient people do not pursue their happiness by asking or waiting for someone else to change first but rather consider, “What is it that I can do differently to change the situation?”

Various writings and research studies have drawn attention to the significance of personal control in our lives. For instance, Stephen Covey, author of the bestselling book, “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,” has emphasized that effective people focus on what they have control over, relegating to the background issues that are beyond their power to change. I am reminded of the words of the Serenity Prayer used by Alcoholics Anonymous, “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Dr. Paul Gerber, a psychologist who has studied the characteristics of adults with learning disabilities (LD) and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) who are successful in their professional and personal lives compared with those who are not, found that a basic attribute for success is “control.” He notes in an article in the ADHD Report, “The more a person with LD and/or ADHD is able to take control of his or her life, the more likely the achievement of success. Control means making conscious and well-grounded decisions to take charge of one’s life. Moreover, it means adapting and shaping one’s thoughts, actions, and behavior to move ahead.”

Gerber’s research is supported by what I have observed in my clinical work with both children and adults with learning and/or attentional problems. I have found that for individuals to be successful, they must move beyond the kind of question a boy once sadly asked me, “Why did God choose me to be the one with ADHD?” Instead, they must adopt the

belief, “I’m not certain why I have LD or ADHD, but now that I know that I do, I must figure out with the appropriate assistance of others how to be successful even with these problems.”

It is very natural to ask “why me?” but a resilient, optimistic lifestyle will be lost if people continue to focus on factors over which they have little, if any, control. What they can control are the steps to take in order to minimize the possibility that their problems become a lifelong albatross around their necks. To define as well as assume ownership for situations in our lives is often a formidable challenge, but the alternative of leading an existence filled with pessimism and despair is much less appealing.

Research also supports the significance of personal control as a major ingredient in both emotional and physical health. An article in *The Boston Globe* in July, 1997 reported a study published in the British journal *Lancet*. The research, which was conducted by Michael Marmot of University College in London, found that it was not senior executives who were more likely to suffer heart attacks, but rather their clerks and secretaries. Even taking into consideration such variables as smoking and poor nutrition, the researchers found that the “lower the job category and the less the control,” the more likely people were to suffer from heart disease.

Marmot’s group noted, “Greater attention to the design of work environments may be one important way to reduce inequalities in health.” Other researchers concurred, suggesting that it was probably easier to provide people more control at work than to change their social status. For instance, Leonard Syme and Jennifer Balfour commenting on the Marmot study noted, “Although it may be difficult to intervene on social class inequalities in health, there are more opportunities to intervene on control. It may also be possible to change environmental forces in the workplace or the community so that more flexibility and control is available.”

Similar findings were reported by Laura Kubansky, a researcher at the Harvard School of Public Health. Kubansky, taking into account such risk factors for heart disease as smoking, high cholesterol, blood pressure, drinking, and family history, found that men in their 60s were less likely to develop coronary heart disease if they possessed an optimistic outlook on life. She concluded, “This shows again there’s a link between how people

look at the world and what happens to them physically. This also shows that optimism can be protective.” A major component of optimism was reported to be the belief that the future will be more pleasant because we can control to a great extent important events in our lives.

I read an article that recommended people identify their “wobble room” even if they work in situations in which they have limited choice in what they do. To locate one’s “wobble room” is to discover one’s area of personal control; this discovery may serve as an antidote to stress.

Illustrations of Weakened Personal Control

At times we are not even aware when we fall prey to making our happiness dependent upon the actions of others. An initial step in assuming personal control is to recognize when our current thoughts and actions are at odds with achieving this sense of control. The following are a few examples:

In marital therapy, a husband said his relationship with his wife would be more satisfying if she displayed more “love and consideration.” His wife, not being thrilled by her husband’s assessment of their marital woes, fired back, “It is my husband who must learn to become more loving and considerate.” Rather than reflecting upon what each could do to strengthen the marriage, this couple assigned responsibility for a better marriage on the shoulders of their spouse.

During a workshop for teachers about stress and burnout, I asked if they focused on what they had control over in their jobs. They responded affirmatively. When I wondered what they thought would help them to feel less stressed, I heard the following: “If the students came from less dysfunctional families, if they came to school more disciplined and more prepared to learn, our jobs would be less stressful.” What they said was true, but in reality they highlighted factors over which they had minimal, if any, control. It was not surprising that they felt burned out. They eventually learned to ask, “How can we create a school environment in which students who come to school poorly prepared will become more cooperative and motivated?” By posing this question, they did not add more pressure to their jobs but rather felt increasingly empowered to seek novel solutions.

The president of a company bemoaned the lack of initiative shown by his managers. “My business would be more successful if I had a staff that was more devoted and creative.” Similar to the last example, his statement contained some truth but what he failed to ask is, “What can I do as the president of the company to nurture an environment where people will be more willing to take risks and be more creative?” If anything, his harsh, critical style worked against his staff feeling more comfortable to seek new solutions. Only when he transformed his style did the performance of his staff improve.

I saw a 50-year-old woman in therapy who contacted me because of anxiety, anger, and difficulty sleeping. The apparent precipitating event of her distress occurred two years earlier when her daughter married a man 10 years her senior who was from a different religion. “I think my daughter could have done better, but she wouldn’t listen to me.” When I asked if she thought her daughter was happy in her marriage, the woman responded, “Who knows? Our relationship has been strained since the marriage so I don’t speak with her that often. She’s not a very grateful daughter.” In therapy, this woman came to realize that it was her daughter’s choice whom to marry, not hers. What she had control over was her response to her daughter’s marriage and whether to attempt to re-establish a more positive relationship.

Strengthening Personal Control

An exercise I have used for years with my adult patients as well as in my workshops to promote personal control is to ask individuals to make a list of three or four things that they would like to see changed in their lives. I then suggest that as they consider each of the items on the list they ask, “For me to achieve this change, does someone else have to change first?” If the answer is “yes,” I recommend that they shift their time and energy to items on the list that do not require someone else to change first. I would encourage you to do this task and reflect upon your answers.

Engaging in this exercise is not meant to imply that we are to “blame” for the situation we would like to see altered, but rather that we assume “responsibility” for initiating change. To develop a resilient mindset requires that we shift from a position of blame to one of responsibility. Once this shift occurs we are more likely to become directors of our own

destiny. Even if our actions do not lead to positive results, rather than blaming others (or ourselves), we are free to examine in a more objective way what may have gone wrong and consider alternative responses.

In “Raising Resilient Children” as well as in our new book about resilience in adults, Sam Goldstein and I describe in detail a man whose struggle to assume ownership of his life permitted him to throw off the shackles of an unhappy, abusive childhood and redirect the path he was on. I should like to share a small part of his journey as a poignant illustration of the power of personal control.

Mr. Larsen grew up in a home in which he was constantly berated by his father for being a weakling. Feelings of affection were strikingly absent. As a teenager Mr. Larsen turned to alcohol to dull his psychological pain. When he met his wife, a very supportive and loving woman, he stopped drinking and had little contact with his father. Mr. and Mrs. Larsen had two sons and for a number of years things went smoothly in their household. However, as his sons reached their adolescent years, the normal stresses of raising teenagers awakened much of the pain Mr. Larsen had experienced with his father. He turned to alcohol once more and as a consequence his relationship with his wife and sons was marked by increased anger and turmoil, which led him into therapy.

The therapy sessions were dominated by discussion of Mr. Larsen’s unresolved feelings towards his father and his realization that he still yearned for his father’s acceptance. He stopped drinking, but he felt that the only way he could truly remove the burden of these unresolved feelings was to convey to his father how he felt and to see if there was an opportunity for reconciliation. The two had rarely communicated with each other during the past 15 years.

After much consideration, Mr. Larsen decided he would express his feelings to his father by writing him a letter. In this letter he described his thoughts and emotions and voiced his desire to re-establish a relationship. He crafted his words carefully to avoid appearing accusatory or demanding. We discussed in advance the different ways in which Mr. Larsen’s father might react, such as writing a hostile letter in return or not answering at all. We did not anticipate his response. Mr. Larsen’s father ripped his son’s letter into small pieces, placed the pieces in an envelope, and mailed them back.

Interestingly, Mr. Larsen was not upset as he recounted this news. He actually displayed some relief. Although he would have preferred reconciling with his father, he noted, “You’ve often said that you have to focus on what you have control over. I had control over communicating with my father but not his response. I did what I had to do, and now that I know my father’s reaction, I can get on with my life and concentrate on making certain I have the best possible relationship with my family. I can give up the fantasy of being accepted by my father and concentrate on accepting my sons.” A truly profound insight!

As I reflect upon my career and my work with patients of all ages and as I consider the evolution of my strength-based approach to therapy, I increasingly appreciate the critical link between personal control and leading a fulfilling, resilient life. I have witnessed too many people searching for their happiness by looking outside themselves. They remain angry and frustrated year after year as their quest for satisfaction fails to yield positive outcomes. I am not suggesting that the actions of others are unimportant, but rather emphasizing that if we wait for others to change we may wait a long time. Mr. Larsen discovered a simple but profound truth that we should all keep in mind on a daily basis: the fundamental source of our happiness resides in our own attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. This truth is the essence of personal control and the foundation for an optimistic, resilient outlook.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>