

## **“Is It Ever Too Late?”—Nurturing Positive Mindsets Throughout Our Lives**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

The beginning of a new year offers a special invitation to reflect upon our hopes, dreams, disappointments, accomplishments, relationships, and goals. While this reflection should not be restricted to a particular time of year, the reality is that resolutions for change abound during the last week of December (does one ever hear of Memorial Day or July 4th or Labor Day or Thanksgiving resolutions?). Some of these resolutions, if carefully and realistically planned and implemented, will be successful. Unfortunately, other well-intentioned resolutions will not be realized, fading quickly into the background. Many of us are familiar with diets or exercise regimes or commitments to spend more time with one’s family that appear so promising on January 1st but do not last beyond the end of the month.

I have frequently been asked, “Why is it so difficult to change? Why do so many resolutions fail? Why do people continue to engage in behaviors that they know can be detrimental to their emotional and/or physical health? Is it ever too late to change?” The answers to these questions vary from one individual to the next. In my clinical practice and workshops, I have heard accounts from people who in their haste to better their lives establish unrealistic expectations and goals. When these goals are not immediately realized, they become discouraged. Rather than re-defining their goals so that they are more achievable, they feel defeated and resign themselves to their previous behaviors.

Some people fall into the trap of creating resolutions that can be reached only if others change first (e.g., “I wouldn’t scream and yell at my son if he did his homework or took out the garbage” or “I would be nice to my wife if she were more loving towards me” or “I would have time to exercise if my boss wasn’t so demanding and I didn’t have to stay at work so late”). In effect, such a mindset relinquishes personal control and responsibility, rendering change problematic.

Relatedly, others unknowingly sabotage their own efforts to change since change represents venturing into uncharted waters. They are fearful of leaving their “comfort zone” even when this so-called comfort zone is

anything but comforting. Although they consciously wish to change, their self-defeating actions reflect the anxiety of giving up the known for the unknown. They would rather remain in a job or a relationship that brings little joy or satisfaction than take the risk of moving into a situation that they fear may lead to more stress rather than exciting opportunities. They are imprisoned by self-doubt that lessens the possibility of creating new, invigorating scripts for their lives.

Another obstacle to change is rooted in the belief, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” While this adage may serve as a handy rationalization to hide feelings of anxiety, it also reflects a theory of psychology that was prevalent when I was first in training as a psychologist, namely, that your basic personality is established by the time you are five or six years old; if one subscribed to this view, it could easily lead to the notion that the only way to alter your personality was to engage in intensive, long-term psychotherapy. At several of my workshops I have jokingly said, “I didn’t learn about this theory until I was in college. I wish my parents had told me about it when I was three years old so I could have done something to change my basic personality.” If you believe that your personality traits are cast in stone and nearly impossible to change, then, of course, you will not change. Expectations are powerful determinants of behavior.

My colleague Sam Goldstein and I have noted in several of our books, especially in *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, which focuses on resilience in adults, that we all possess mindsets or assumptions about ourselves and others that influence our behaviors. If we are to modify our behaviors, we must also examine our mindsets. If our mindset is dominated by feelings of self-doubt and insecurities, if we are seeking our happiness by hoping that someone else changes first, then we will have a difficult time initiating the necessary steps to change. However, if we entertain the belief that change, even in small quantities, is within our grasp and that we are the authors of our own lives, we are more likely to pursue new behaviors. In turn, if these new behaviors lead to a more productive, satisfying lifestyle, they will reinforce a more optimistic mindset, resulting in further positive changes in our behavior. In such a scenario a positive, energized cycle is set in motion that will eventuate in a more resilient mindset and lifestyle.

I believe that whatever factors interfere with the adoption of an optimistic outlook and lifestyle, it is never too late to become more hopeful and resilient. To do so we must appreciate that the power to change resides within each of us and that there are realistic steps we can take to achieve a more satisfying life. Sam and I detailed these steps in *The Power of Resilience* and I have also outlined them in several of my website articles. For those who question whether it is too late to change, I would recommend you read the many research findings reported in “The Positive Aging Newsletter” by psychologists Ken and Mary Gergen (to read and subscribe to the newsletter, please go to <http://www.positiveaging.net>). These studies strongly indicate that positive shifts in the mindsets and behaviors of individuals beyond their middle age years are commonplace. As people live longer lives, there may be arguments about when the middle age years officially end. However, less important than designating an age are the findings that our attitudes and behaviors are receptive to change throughout our lives. Thus, these studies have relevance for people even in younger age brackets.

I think it would be helpful to examine several of the research studies reported in “The Positive Aging Newsletter.” They provide evidence that our journey in life is not fixed if we display the insight and courage to learn from the past while pursuing new paths. They also highlight the idea that our perceptions and attitudes determine our behaviors and that these perceptions can be modified.

For example, in the October, 2004 issue of their newsletter, the Gergens observe, “The common view of life development approximates a rainbow. First, there is upward growth, then a long period at the top of the rainbow, and then decline. Yet, as we have demonstrated in previous editions of the Newsletter, this metaphor has damaging consequences. To accept decline as the true nature of aging is to invite depression, inactivity, incapacity, and early death. Alternative metaphors are much in need. As one colleague ventured, would it not be more promising to see us entering a butterfly period in which we emerge from the chrysalis and spread our wings? Of course, the common answer to such a proposal is, ‘but you have to face the facts; people do lose various capacities. Your body won’t let you do the same things you did as a youth.’”

The language used by the Gergens resonated with me. Their advocacy for alternative metaphors may be interpreted as an illustration of changing

our mindsets. While we may have little, if any, control over losses in certain capacities (obviously we will maintain more control if we practice a healthy lifestyle), the Gergens cite research conducted by Yael Benyamini and Jacob Lomranz in Tel Aviv that illustrates that what we definitely have control over are our attitudes about these losses and that these attitudes determine our emotional well-being.

Benyamini and Lomranz conducted a study with 423 older adults who were forced to give up various activities such as soccer, volleyball, and back-packing because of their physical condition. The Gergens note, "As might be anticipated, the research indicated a strong association between the loss of activity and expressions of depression. However, for a large sub-sample of the group this correlation did not hold. These people had located alternative activities to replace those that had been lost. Some who loved to play ball on the beach learned to enjoy jogging or growing vegetables. For this group the feelings of well-being were essentially the same as for people in full health." In essence, people chose alternative behaviors because they could envision these behaviors. They were not paralyzed by a negative mindset or a belief that one cannot adapt to changing circumstances.

In the December, 2004 issue of their newsletter, the Gergens report research undertaken by Klaus Rothermund and Jochen Brandtstadter to assess the ways in which people cope with functional impairments that may interfere with various activities. The study involved a sample of 762 individuals between the ages of 58-81. When faced with these impairments, there were many individuals who remained contented with their lives. "How did satisfaction remain so high? Primarily by resisting common definitions. Two major strategies of resistance were documented. On the one hand, many people ceased to define their performance in terms of the common culture. Rather they developed new standards for good performance. Rather than asking, 'Am I good at this?' they ask, 'Am I good at this for my age?' A second mode of resistance was to discredit the importance of the skill or ability. They came to see that it was not so important to engage in the activities that required the lost capacities anymore. 'Why is it so important to excel at these things?' they ask."

While some might argue that this study implies that satisfaction is associated with a denial of reality (e.g., this skill or ability is not

important), I believe a more accurate interpretation would be that satisfied people accept reality, but rather than permitting themselves to feel defeated, they choose to reframe their perceptions and expectations in a more optimistic fashion.

Another study, reported in the May, 2004 newsletter, strongly suggests that focusing on situations for which one is grateful reinforces positive emotions and life satisfaction. The study, conducted by psychologists Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, evaluated 65 adults between the ages of 22 to 77 who suffered from a form of neuromuscular disease, such as post-polio condition. Participants were given a form on which to evaluate their daily experiences including their emotional experiences and well-being. In addition, half of the group was specifically asked to describe events in their day for which they were grateful.

The results indicated that those participants who reflected each day upon situations for which they were grateful reported “more sleep, better quality of sleep, greater optimism about the future, and a greater sense of connectedness to others. There was also a reduction in negative affect.” Emmons and McCullough offer some thought-provoking observations. “Gratitude and the actions stimulated by it, build and strengthen social bonds and friendships. . . . (It) leads them to feel loved and cared for by others. . . . Gratitude is also likely to build and strengthen a sense of spirituality. . . . It broadens the scope of cognition and enables flexible and creative thinking; it also facilitates coping with stress and adversity. Gratitude not only makes people feel good in the present, but it also increases the likelihood that people will function optimally and feel good in the future.”

The Gergens write, “The researchers concluded that counting one’s blessings was a fairly simple way to improve one’s sense of life satisfaction.” While some may question the words “fairly simple,” what the Emmons and McCullough study highlights is that at any age we have more of a choice than we may realize to focus on the positive rather than the negative. A recognition that change is inevitable and brings with it opportunities for emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual growth permits us to accept ownership for our own lives and to avoid perceiving ourselves as victims. To list things for which we are grateful is not a quick-fix, Pollyannish exercise, but rather an exercise that helps us to challenge and overcome self-defeating assumptions and behaviors.

Dr. Rosalene Glickman, in her excellent book *Optimal Thinking*, offers a quote from George Bernard Shaw that captures the power we have to shape our attitudes and behaviors. Shaw contends, “People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don’t believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can’t find them, make them.”

Shaw’s words are well-worth considering. I would only emphasize that his sentiment is applicable for people of all ages. We must appreciate that we have within us the power to change negative mindsets and self-defeating behaviors throughout our lives. While this power may not be easy to harness, we must not lose sight of the alternative, namely, leading a pessimistic, helpless, unhappy existence.

As we choose the path we take, my best wishes for a satisfying and productive 2005.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>