

A New Year: Any Planned Changes?

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

I have often voiced reservations about the effectiveness of New Year's resolutions. I enthusiastically support replacing "negative scripts" in our lives with healthier attitudes and behaviors. However, far too often the initial determination and enthusiasm associated with these resolutions wane within a month or two. But why? The reasons vary from one person to the next, but a key variable for many is a failure to have a realistic plan for accomplishing the goals of the resolution. In addition, most people do not build in safety nets to manage obstacles that may appear. Rather than making adjustments to unrealistic goals and/or an unsuccessful plan, many abandon their resolution and revert to old scripts and habits.

A couple of examples follow, which I believe are not uncommon occurrences:

Joe had gained a noticeable amount of weight during the past 10 years. At the beginning of December he looked at an old photo of himself before the extra pounds began to accumulate. He shifted his eyes from the photo to the mirror. As he looked at himself, he could not help noticing the paunch that had grown insidiously in his stomach area. Joe didn't like what he saw. He even attempted to hold in his stomach, assuming the stance of a bodybuilder. Unfortunately, even that exercise did not hide his bulging midsection. Perhaps equally sad, he wasn't able to hold his breath very long, becoming easily exhausted.

Joe muttered to himself, "I really don't like the way I look. But it's not only the way I look. I don't seem to have the energy I once had. I get tired so quickly." He thought about the advertisement he had recently seen on television of former athletes who had lost a great deal of weight; all of them pronounced how good they felt, with one asserting, "If I could do it anyone could do it."

Joe vowed as his New Year resolution he would refrain from desserts and he would exercise on a regular basis, not only to lose weight but to adopt a more healthy lifestyle. He even got a head start on his resolution, buying and using a treadmill and some weights by the middle of December, exercising every day. On December 31 he felt he was ahead of the game, having initiated his new behaviors prior to January 1.

Joe was convinced that he would fulfill his resolution. He diligently exercised from the day he bought his fitness equipment and was proud that even at a New Year's Day party, he passed on his favorite chocolate cake.

Yet, by the end of January he began to skip days of exercise and became discouraged that he was not losing more weight. His disillusionment prompted him to eat more as he told himself, "What's the use? Unfortunately, I was born with a poor metabolism and I just don't have the energy or the will power to follow through on things." His wife, Lori, worried about his weight gain and health, asked each morning if he had exercised. Joe, angry with himself, expressed his annoyance towards Lori. "You treat me like a kid. I'll exercise when I have a chance. I've been very busy at work and don't have any free time."

Joe became increasingly discouraged. Within a couple of months his treadmill and weights sat idly by, rarely if ever used. Sound familiar?

Jill, a single mother, frequently yelled at her 8-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son, especially when they neglected to fulfill household responsibilities. A couple of weeks before the New Year she became especially upset when her son spilled a glass of milk at dinner. Her tolerance level was even lower than usual because it had been a difficult day at work, including some criticism directed at her by her supervisor. As the milk spilled she screamed at her son, "You just don't pay attention to what you're doing! If you did, you wouldn't spill a glass of milk! Look at the mess you made!"

Her son began to cry and said, "Mommy, you scare me when you yell like that." Jill was startled by her son's words and tears and quickly hugged him. She apologized for what she had said. Later that evening, after putting the kids to bed, she decided that one of her New Year's resolutions would be not to yell at her kids and instead display more affection towards them. She didn't like how negative she had become. She remembered how often her parents had yelled at her and how scared and angry she felt when they did. She thought about having left her ex-husband because of his emotional abuse and constant criticisms.

Jill, like Joe, was determined to follow through on her resolution. She saw a flyer about a parenting group being offered after the first of the year by a local community agency and registered to attend. The group met once a week in the evening for six

weeks. She knew she might be tired having to work all day and attend the group at night, but she thought it was important to gather some new ideas about parenting. She enjoyed the first group meeting and looked forward to attending the next one.

The following week she stopped for pizza for herself and her kids so she wouldn't be rushed at dinner before going to the group. As they were eating, the babysitter called to say that she was sick and couldn't come over. Jill quickly called two other possible babysitters but they were also busy. In desperation she phoned her ex-husband who lived just a mile away and asked if he could babysit for a couple of hours. He not only said that he had other plans, but with some sarcasm added, "You could certainly use a parenting class, but I can't come over."

In the presence of her children Jill cursed at him as she hung up the phone. She was understandably upset. She didn't get to the group that night, but instead of thinking ahead to attending the following week, she became increasingly anxious and angry. Negative thoughts flooded her mind including, "It will be tough to catch up with the group now that I've missed tonight's meeting. Why can't anything go right in my life? Would it have hurt him (her ex-husband) to help out?" Her anger spilled out towards her children as she yelled at them to clean the table. Her son said, "You promised you weren't going to yell anymore." Jill snapped back, "If you and your sister did what you were asked to do the first time then I wouldn't have to yell at you!"

Sadly, Jill did not return to the group, convincing herself that it probably wouldn't be helpful given all the problems she had to face.

Overcoming Obstacles to Change

I have seen individuals similar to Joe and Jill throughout my career as a therapist. They have every good intention to make changes in the ways they conduct their lives. These intentions are often heightened at the start of a new year, a time in which the traditions of many cultures invite people to reflect upon their behaviors and initiate changes.

Without doubt I don't believe that changes have to wait until January 1. Imagine if a therapist told perspective patients, "It will be most beneficial to start our therapy after the first of the year when most likely you will be most receptive to examining your life and most willing to make necessary changes." Obviously, I am being facetious about

such a comment, but I do understand the attraction of a new year as a time to commit ourselves to modifying the negative scripts in our lives.

Whenever we resolve to change it's important to appreciate the possible obstacles that stand in our way so that we are better prepared to manage these obstacles and move forward with our plans. The following are several key points we should consider. They may seem obvious, but sometimes when we are trapped in particular ways of thinking and behaving we fail to notice what might be very apparent to others.

Be realistic about the goals you set. In the books about resilience I have co-authored with my friend and colleague Sam Goldstein, we have provided examples of individuals who desired dramatic results immediately, whether it was a businessman saying he would make certain he was home on time every night for dinner when in the past he had difficulty making it home even once a month for dinner (in therapy, we decided it would be wise for him to start by coming home on time for dinner one evening a week and building on that success) or a man who had not previously exercised saying that he wanted to start by running five miles a day (he had little understanding that it takes time and patience to build up to those many miles; after a discussion in therapy he began by walking around his block several times until he became tired).

Joan Buchbinder, who is a neighbor of mine, was interviewed by Bella English for an article in a recent issue of *The Boston Globe*. Joan served as a nutritionist for the New England Patriots for 17 years and is currently the nutritionist for the Boston Celtics. She was asked, "Most New Year's resolutions have to do with diet and exercise. What do you advise your clients?" Joan's answer touched directly on the issue of realistic, achievable goals. She responded:

I suggest that they make extremely realistic resolutions. If they say they're going to exercise every day, that's not realistic because they haven't been exercising every day. Whatever method you choose has to be one that you like, that you can sustain, and that you can see yourself doing forever. If people love carbs, and go on a low-carb diet just until they lose weight, they're going to go back to the old ways and gain that weight right back.

Distinguish between long-term and short-term goals and enjoy the short-term accomplishments. This ties to being realistic, but deserves separate mention. It

makes sense to define long-term goals. However, as simple as it may sound, long-term goals can be divided into short-term goals. As admirable as it was for Joe to begin exercising every day, it may have been overly ambitious. Once he missed a few days, he felt that it was too difficult to stick with a certain regimen and he stopped. In addition, viewing advertisements on television that frequently suggested a more rapid weight loss than he experienced during the first few weeks of his diet and exercise lessened his enthusiasm for his seemingly modest achievements.

We all need small successes to build upon as we move towards the final goal. As obvious as it might sound, in every book I have authored or co-authored I delight in the completion of each individual chapter. It is a concrete accomplishment that I know brings me closer to the end goal of completing the entire manuscript. We must learn to celebrate the achievement of short-term goals, which unfortunately many do not do.

Jill came to consult with me several months after the incident I reported. Her anxiety, sadness, and anger had become more prominent. Physical ailments prompted Jill to see her primary care physician who referred her to me. We discussed her failed New Year's resolution and the parenting group. Jill was taken aback but appreciative when I didn't criticize her for quitting the group. Instead, I noted, "I think it took a lot of initiative for you to find a parenting group and attend the first meeting. It shows me that you really wanted to make changes, but I'm not certain you appreciated how important that first step was."

I continued, "What we have to figure out is how you can cope more effectively with a situation like the one that occurred before you were to go to the second group meeting."

I do not wish to simplify the complicated issues involved in Jill's feelings about herself and her actions towards her children, but all of us must learn to celebrate (even quietly) the steps we do achieve. If we do not, disappointment, frustration, and anger may become the prominent emotions in our lives.

Anticipate setbacks. Early in my career I discovered that seemingly brilliant, creative plans of action drawn up in my office were not always successful in the "real world." As carefully as my patients and I considered strategies for modifying negative scripts, things often did not work out as smoothly as we had anticipated. The setback

often triggered negative feelings that interfered with future progress. Parents who attempted new approaches with their children complained, “We went out of our way to change and our children are not willing to change. They’re just irresponsible.” Husbands and wives offered similar comments about the lack of effort their spouse demonstrated in making changes. At other times, the anger was directed against oneself such as the mother who lamented, “I would guess the strategies we discussed work for most parents. They didn’t work for me. I’m just not an effective parent and don’t do things right.”

Given these responses to setbacks, I introduced a statement into my therapeutic activities. After developing strategies for change, I began to ask, “This sounds like a good strategy, but what if it doesn’t work?”

While someone hearing this might argue, “Bob, you’re an optimistic person. Why would you bring up the possibility of something not working after we’ve planned so carefully? It’s like a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure.”

I can understand that sentiment, but I counteract any possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure by stating, “I think what we have considered has a good chance of succeeding, but I always like to be prepared. I like to have back-up plans in case the first plan is not as effective as we had hoped.”

I add, “How do you think you’ll feel and react if things don’t work out as planned? I’m bringing this up because some people become discouraged and they blame themselves or others and get stuck in the status quo. If we can view any setbacks as experiences from which we can learn rather than feel defeated, it will be easier to move to new goals and strategies.”

One of the major attributes of resilient people is the willingness to anticipate and confront setbacks and obstacles not with despair but with new approaches. Jill and I examined how she might have handled the evening that her babysitter cancelled because of illness and her ex-husband was critical of her parenting skills.

Jill said, “With hindsight I could have told myself that sometimes things like this come up. Instead of cursing at my ex-husband, especially in front of our kids, I could have said to him, ‘Comments like yours don’t help the situation’ and then hung up. And instead of becoming panicky and telling myself that if I missed tonight’s group I would be behind everyone else, I could have gone the next week and even asked what I had

missed. Instead of yelling at the kids, I could have taken a mental time-out and modeled being a calm mother by telling them that I wouldn't be able to go to the group that night, but since I'm home we could play a game together."

Jill then paused and reflected, "It seems so easy with hindsight to think about what I could have done, but at the moment that an upsetting situation occurs, it's not so easy to think of alternatives."

I replied, "I know, but that's one of the reasons I think it's important to consider in advance possible obstacles to our resolutions or plans so that we are prepared to cope with these obstacles more effectively."

Replace blame with responsibility. I have emphasized that resilient people are those when faced with adversity do not blame themselves nor do they blame others. Instead, they replace blame with responsibility by asking, "What is it that I can do differently to improve this situation?" Once blame becomes a prominent part of our personal landscape, it is difficult to realize the goals we have set either in our New Year's resolutions or at any time of year.

I have frequently emphasized, "We are the authors of our own lives and consequently, we have the power to make changes in our thoughts and behaviors." Resilient people appreciate that they must assume what I call "personal control" of their lives; if any of us is looking for our happiness by someone else changing first we will continue to remain unhappy.

Once Joe blamed his failure to lose weight on being "born with a poor metabolism" he relinquished hope. It was as if he were saying, "I was born with a condition that cannot be modified. None of the steps I am taking can change this inborn condition." Such a belief became an indomitable force against self-improvement.

Similarly, when Jill was angry and frustrated and told her son, "If you and your sister did what you were asked to do the first time then I wouldn't have to yell at you!" she resorted to the "blame game." In saying this I am not blaming Jill since I appreciated how frustrated she was. However, as Jill learned in therapy, blame weighs us down so that we are not able to initiate even small, constructive actions. Before she could move forward with more positive behaviors she had to learn to tell herself, "I know I have

every right to be angry, but I also have responsibility for learning more effective ways of dealing with my anger and not taking it out on myself or my kids.”

Consider the Alternatives

At a number of my workshops I end with a comment that a member of the audience made many years ago. “Dr. Brooks, you really have some very good ideas, but as I listen to you I realize that they’re not easy to achieve.”

I replied, “I agree. If the ideas I am suggesting were very easy to achieve, attending just one of my workshops or having one therapy session with me would be all that is necessary to make the changes we want. Change is a process. We have to recognize what needs to be changed, what we have to take responsibility for, what steps we have to assume to make the changes, and how we plan to handle setbacks along the way. Yes, change can be a very challenging task.”

And then I add the following thought, “If we think what I have just described is hard work, consider the alternatives: living with frustration and unhappiness, with relationships that are unsatisfying, and with goals and dreams that never move beyond promises. The really hard work is getting up each morning and living an existence that is unfulfilled. I would prefer to take actions, however formidable, that will add satisfaction, purpose, and meaning to my life. Of course, we all have to make our own choice about in which areas we should do our hard work. I hope we all make wise choices.”

My best wishes for a satisfying and productive 2010.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>