

**Changing “Negative Scripts”: We Are the Authors of Our Own Lives--
A Message for the New Year
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First, let me wish you all a very happy 2000. Second, in this my first website column in the New Millennium I should like to share some thoughts about actions we can take so that the New Year might prove more satisfying and productive to us.

Have any of you found yourself saying the same thing repeatedly to your husband, wife, children, students, co-workers, colleagues, or employees, and although your words or actions have little, if any, positive effect, you continue to say them anyway? Or can you imagine the following scenario? Suppose there was a miniature Bob Brooks in your ear and I whispered just as you were preparing to say something, “Do you think that what you plan to say is going to work this time even though it has never worked before?” In response you honestly answered, “No,” but proceeded to say it anyway? Many people say or do things knowing that their words or actions will not lead to the desired results. I have been impressed during my career by the number of well-intentioned people who continue to repeat the same ineffective behaviors, but somehow expect a different result. While I believe in perseverance, I also believe that when an approach obviously is not working, it may be time for a new approach.

I as well as others have labeled the practice of repeating ineffective or even harmful words and behaviors as “negative scripts.” Perhaps the term “negative scripts” is self-explanatory. I have found that most of us are very predictable, sometimes to a fault. We follow the same routine, respond the same way to others, and often assume that when the script involves other people, it is they who should change, not us. It seems as if we are actors and actresses reading a script, and rarely will we stray from that script even when we are not too happy with its wording and direction.

Before continuing I should be clear that not all scripts in our lives are “negative.” For example, if you are a manager and greet your colleagues in a warm fashion each morning, or if you tell your spouse each day how much you love her or him, or if you are a teacher and find time to say something complimentary to each of your students and these behaviors improve your relationship with these other people, I would characterize this as a “positive script.” These positive scripts typically are not in need of modification since they result in more satisfying experiences for ourselves and for those with whom we interact in our different roles.

I have written and lectured about the scripts of our lives for years, but perhaps the theme is accentuated during the beginning of a New Year and in this case a New

Millennium. The New Year is often accompanied by that time-honored tradition of New Year's Resolutions in which we make a list of things about ourselves that we promise we will change, a promise that for most people lasts but a few days (in some cases just a few hours, especially if it has to do with modifications in our diet and exercise). When we make such resolutions, even if they are short-lived, what we are really saying is that we have made a commitment to change a certain behavior or pattern in ourselves that we believe needs changing.

In several of my previous website columns as well as in my other writings I have offered examples of individuals displaying the courage to move from their "comfort zones" and changing scripts that were bringing them and others in their lives little joy or gratification (see, for example, my June 1999 column about "stress hardiness" in which I discuss the importance of focusing on changing those things in our lives over which we have control). Yet, it is intriguing how many people say they would like to change something about themselves, something that is within their control to change, but obstacles keep them from doing so, whether it is fear of change or a belief that the other people should change first. It may be useful first to examine several illustrations of negative scripts. Then I would like to share a few principles to guide us to make changes in negative scripts that permeate our lives.

I consulted with a business manager who had a disgruntled staff, a number of whom resigned from the company. At first, he expressed surprise that so many people had left since he saw himself as being fair and welcoming their input. However, in my consultation I was to discover that when an employee conveyed concern about some aspect of the business, this manager who prided himself on being open to new ideas immediately dismissed the employee's comments. In one instance, he even told an employee who offered several suggestions for change, "You have problems with authority" while at another time he blamed those who reported to him as not being "appreciative and always wanting more." Rather than considering and applying the feedback he had received, he refused to make any changes in his behavior, instead placing the burden of change on his staff. Because of his blindspot and defensiveness, he was entrenched in a "negative script" that restricted him from taking the initiative and making modifications in his behavior. When I pointed this out to him in a nonjudgmental manner during the consultation, he immediately became defensive, but after some reflection he understood that if those who worked with him were to become more positive, then he as their manager had to take the first steps to change. The importance of this change of attitude is that it required him to shift his focus from wishing others would change to asking himself what he could do differently.

With this new outlook, the manager became aware of how negative his style was. In a moment of honesty he told me, “I go into work each morning looking for what my staff has done wrong. I wouldn’t want anyone to do this to me, but I do it to them. I just want to motivate them, but what I’m doing is leading to more tension.” This realization prompted him to examine and change his script by making a commitment to give positive feedback to his staff, who at first wondered what his “ulterior” motive might be. However, this seemingly small modification in his behavior served as a catalyst for a more positive work environment.

I recall a father with whom I worked who was feeling stressed out as work consumed an increasing amount of his time. His wife and two children began to complain that he was never available, which became more obvious when he missed his eight-year-old daughter’s birthday party because he was “stuck” at the office. Although he said that his family was his top priority in life, his actions were not in accord with his stated values. At first, he argued that his working long hours was to enable him to earn enough money to support his family in a comfortable style. In a parent counseling session he said to his wife, “I wish you appreciated all of my efforts instead of harping on my being late for dinner and not spending enough time with the kids.” Similar to others caught in a “negative script,” it was easier for him to look for the solution to his problems by asking another person to change rather than looking at what he might change. Contributing to his stress was that his behavior (spending little time with his wife and children) was at odds with his stated values (his family having top priority in his life).

As I do with most of the people I see in my clinical practice or with whom I consult, I discussed negative scripts and recommended that in changing his script he not attempt to do too much at once. Instead, his initial goal was to insure that he be home in time for dinner at least one evening a week. While some people might argue that it was his obligation as a husband and father to be home for dinner more than one evening a week, I have found that in most instances when changing longstanding “negative scripts” there is more of a likelihood of positive outcome and thus, more of a probability of future change, when the changes in script are realistic and achievable. Not surprisingly, this one evening a week soon expanded to several evenings a week and he also built in “special times” for each of his children and his wife (please see my October 1999 column for a discussion of special times).

Another example of modifying negative scripts comes from the field of education. I consulted with a kindergarten teacher about a child who she described as “not following rules and being disrespectful.” One example of his failure to follow rules involved recess when he often disappeared in the field outside the classroom and his teacher had to go out

and look for him. I could certainly understand her distress at this behavior. However, her response was to punish him by not permitting him to go out to recess. My “reading” of the situation was that this was a hyperactive, somewhat disorganized child who would readily get “lost” in less structured activities such as recess. Without her awareness, this teacher’s reaction had in actuality become a negative script characterized by a punitive approach. She continually kept him in for recess (actually, not the best intervention for a hyperactive child) and when he went out she constantly reminded him that he had to be back on time. She said, “My comments seem to fall on deaf ears. He doesn’t listen to me. He has to learn to listen to what I say.”

This teacher had been saying and doing the same things for months with no change in this child’s behavior. On a positive note, she could laugh when I asked in an empathic way, “Do you think the next time you remind this child not to get lost at recess or to be back to the class on time,” he will say, “I have seen the light. All of your reminders and all of the times you kept me in from recess have paid off and I will now become a more responsible child”? She began to understand that she was involved in a negative script, expecting the child to make the first changes. This understanding prompted a change in perspective. She could appreciate that it would not be giving in to this child for her to change her approach. As an alternative strategy, we discussed providing this child with a “job” that would help motivate him to be back in class on time. She appointed him the “recess monitor,” a position that required him to hold the door open for his classmates to go outside and then to be the first one back so that he could hold the door open as his classmates returned. This very creative teacher also made a button with the words “recess monitor” printed on it that this child wore proudly. The teacher had changed her script and found that it resulted in her student changing his.

As a clinical psychologist, a husband, and a father, I know how difficult it can be to make changes in our lives, to change those scripts that have proven ineffective. I attempt to remind myself and those with whom I work that we “are the authors of our own life” and if we do not like something about ourselves or about a particular situation, then we must re-write our scripts. Let me offer a few guidelines for re-writing scripts, guidelines that hopefully will make the task easier and lead to successful outcomes.

1. Make a list of the things you would like to see changed in your life.
2. From this list select a couple of things on which to focus initially. The selection should be guided by the following questions: Is this an important issue in my life? Is this something over which I have control? Is this something that I can realistically begin to change in the near future? Do I truly believe it is my responsibility to change or do I feel others should change first and then I will change? What one or two changes can I begin

to make? For example, the manager who recognized he had adopted a very negative approach to his staff realized that this was an important issue, that it was something about which he had some control to change, and that he could begin to make these changes in the immediate future by modifying his script. Very importantly, he recognized that his staff would probably not change unless he took the initiative to change.

3. As the old saying recommends, “Don’t bite off more than you can chew.” I have observed that one of the biggest mistakes that individuals make in changing scripts is to attempt to change too much at once (this is very evident in people who go on “crash diets” or go from no exercise to thinking they can jog five miles the first day). In changing your scripts, whether these scripts concern your relationship with other people or habits in your life (e.g., exercising), you must be realistic. Remember, that as much as possible you want to “program” yourself for success since success breeds further success. I recall a rather overweight man who with the input of a trainer at a gym slowly built up an exercise regimen. Each time he reached his goal and experienced success, he was motivated to move on to the next goal.

4. Closely related to this last point is that when we make changes that involve our relationship with other people, we should not abandon our approach if at first these others do not acknowledge or appreciate our changes. If we have been following a negative script for months or years, we must remember that the other people in our lives have had their own scripts for years. When a husband who has neglected to say, “I love you” to his wife suddenly begins to say these words to her, her initial reaction may be bewilderment about what is going on. Don’t worry, just persist in doing the right thing. Or when a parent whose first words to his or her children when arriving home each night are, “Have you done your homework yet?” changes the script and offers words of love and encouragement, the children may not immediately alter their usual feelings of anger, but they are likely to do so if the parent continues to voice love rather than reminders about homework.

5. If after a reasonable amount of time the changes you have made in your script seem unsuccessful, do not become discouraged. Instead, adopt a problem-solving attitude and ask, “Why haven’t the changes been effective?” “What can I learn from this?” “What can I do differently so that the results may be more positive next time?” For example, as many of you know, I often suggest that parents establish a “special time” with their children either each night or as often as possible, a time during which parents would engage their kids in such activities as reading to or playing games with them. One family built in these special times, but when the phone rang the parents would excuse themselves to take the phone call and sometimes remain on for 15 minutes or more.

Although they apologized to their children, soon the children lost interest and/or were angered by this so-called “special time.” If observers were watching this scenario, they could easily identify why the script was ineffective, but when you are part of a script it is often difficult to appreciate where it is going wrong. Interestingly, the children themselves angrily told the parents that if a time was special, then it should not be interrupted by phone calls. The parents learned from this feedback and adopted the commonsense practice of not answering the phone during “special times.” A positive impact was felt immediately.

I am not an advocate of New Year’s Resolutions even though many are made with the best intentions. These resolutions are often doomed for failure for a variety of the reasons I have described—the goals and expectations are unrealistic, they are made without careful consideration or reflection, and when these resolutions involve others, we often believe that these others should make the first changes. Instead, I suggest that you should see what happens when you follow the guidelines I have listed above. Begin with a selection of one or two realistic and achievable changes that you can make in your life script. As you struggle to write a new script do not lose sight of the fact that we are the authors of our own lives. This knowledge is empowering and hopefully will enable you to disengage from scripts that have proved ineffective and self-defeating to scripts that bring you greater enjoyment and contentment.

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