

## **So What Resolutions Have You Made for 2013 and How Successful Do You Think You Will Be?**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

Many of my readers know from past articles that I have reservations about the effectiveness of New Year's resolutions. Don't get me wrong. As someone who has advocated the belief, "We are the authors of our own lives and have far more control over our reactions and behaviors than we often realize," I enthusiastically support identifying and modifying any counterproductive thoughts and behaviors that pervade our lives. I also appreciate that the beginning of a new year seems like a logical time to make changes in one's lifestyle. The thinking that prevails is, "It's a new year. What better time to put aside old habits and make a fresh start?"

Unfortunately, as has constantly been reported, the enthusiasm and motivation associated with New Year's resolutions typically wane within a brief period of time. Just think of the exercise equipment in our homes that gather dust, of the gym memberships that are used less and less, of high calorie desserts that are consumed on a more regular basis with each passing day, and of kind words and gestures towards others that we neglect to express as the year moves along. Many other examples can be offered of resolutions that seemed so promising on January 1 and so frustrating to accomplish a month or two later.

I have contended, especially in my books written with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, that there is no edict that dictates that changes in lifestyle be confined to the first day of the year, as natural a time as that might seem. Why wait weeks or even months until the emergence of a new year to initiate modifications in our behavior that deserve to be addressed much sooner? More important than when we begin to create the "new me" is the task of identifying the qualities of the new me and then implementing effective strategies for achieving these qualities. If we don't consider our goals for change, the choices we make may be haphazard at best.

Having written about New Year's resolutions in a couple of previous articles I had not planned to devote my first article of 2013 to this theme, but I was prompted to do so by the seemingly higher than usual number of newspaper and magazine pieces

addressing this topic. As examples, Oliver Burkeman wrote an article in *Newsweek* titled “The New Year’s Resolutions that Won’t Fail You,” Beth Teitell of *The Boston Globe* wrote “Many Not Making New Year’s Resolutions: 40% Eschew the Yearly Tradition,” while several staff of *The Boston Globe* co-authored “Practical Tips for a Healthier 2013: Small Changes Can Lead to a Better Lifestyle,” detailing strategies for successful New Year’s resolutions. Leon Neyfakh of *The Boston Globe* authored a piece with the intriguing title “Meet Future You. (Now Be Nice.) Psychology Offers a Strange New Tactic for Keeping Your Resolutions,” and a similar theme was offered by John Tierney in his *The New York Times* article “Why You Won’t Be the Person You Expect to Be.”

Given what appeared to be a plethora of articles about New Year’s resolutions, I decided to re-visit the topic in this month’s article. It seems to attract ongoing interest. I hope that as you consider the information that follows you will go beyond the confines of New Year’s resolutions and instead ask, “In what ways might I use this knowledge to help create a more resilient lifestyle during any point or month of my life?” As obvious as it may seem, changing so-called “negative scripts” that burden our lives need not be limited to a certain day or month of the year. If you feel most comfortable initiating changes on a holiday, let me suggest one possibility for the citizens of the United States: July 4, Independence Day. What better day than to free oneself from the shackles of self-defeating thoughts and behavior and assume more control of one’s life?

### **Why Make New Year’s Resolutions At All?**

Prior to reading Teitell’s article in *The Boston Globe* I hadn’t really thought about nor would I have guessed how many people make New Year’s resolutions and how many refrain from doing so. Teitell quotes John Norcross, a psychology professor at the University of Scranton and author of *Changeology: 5 Steps to Realizing Your Goals and Resolutions*, who reported that studies indicate about 60% of American adults intend to make a resolution, but only 40% actually do. That leaves 40% who had absolutely no intention of making any kind of resolution.

Teitell observes, “The abstainers fall into two categories: those who say the annual rite is for wimps who put off making changes and those who have been repeatedly burned by their own failings. Sandy Poirier, the owner of Shag hair salon in South

Boston, is decidedly in the first group. 'I don't have to start fresh with the New Year,' he said. 'I stay in shape. I work out. I'm a good person.' Brenda van der Merwe, a realtor, agrees. 'If you are going to live life well, you should already be doing it. . . , not saying this is what I am going to do with my life after this date passes. It's just a way of putting it off.'"

Teitell also interviewed people who abstained from New Year's resolutions given past failures. Jessica Hazelton observed "that she has come to her no-resolution policy after yearly failures. 'I would always get disappointed with myself.' Now Hazelton sets goals, not resolutions, and makes them over the year. 'I feel like I'm constantly trying to be a better person.'"

Joseph Ferrari, a psychology professor at DePaul University and author of *Still Procrastinating? The No Regrets Guide to Getting It Done*, offers an explanation for people failing to achieve their resolutions. Ferrari highlights a seemingly obvious factor about which I have also written, namely, failure is more likely to occur when we establish unrealistic goals. He observes, "We are in this instant generation. If you are trying to lose 40 pounds and you lose four, you're disappointed. But if your goal is four and you lose six, you'll be happy." He advises in Teitell's article that "people set small goals and reward themselves along the way." And in this age of social media that people "consider making resolutions public, perhaps on Facebook. Now you are going to be held accountable."

As I reflected upon the Facebook recommendation I had a mixed reaction. I thought that while a public announcement might serve as positive motivation for some people, it might increase stress and even shame in others, especially if initial goals were not realistic and thus not achieved. In making resolutions public you must assess the risks involved and whether these risks might actually work against achieving your goals. In addition, you must consider to whom you are announcing plans for change and what changes are you targeting. Depending on the issues and people involved, group support can be very helpful or it can easily turn into undue group pressure. Another warning related to social media is that you might be broadcasting personal information now that at a future date you wish had remained private.

I smiled as I read the insights of another person interviewed by Teitell. Zayna Gold, co-owner of the Boston Body Pilates and Barre Studios, had a unique perspective about why she no longer makes resolutions. She noted this was the first year ever that had not resolved to lose weight. “Just knowing I was going to make a resolution was a license to binge over the holidays. Now I don’t want to overeat. This is crazy, but I’ve lost five pounds. I’m thinner than before I had children.”

But before we delegate the act of making resolutions to a pile of relics of the past let us return to the research of Norcross who found that “people who explicitly make resolutions are 10 times more likely to attain their goals than equally motivated people who do not.”

Different research about resolutions can certainly become confusing.

### **The Perils of Positive Thinking**

While pondering the implications housed in Teitell’s article, I read Burkeman’s piece in *Newsweek*. Burkeman is a columnist for *The Guardian* and the author of a book with the provocative title: *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can’t Stand Positive Thinking*. I have not had an opportunity to read his book, but at first glance some of his remarks in *Newsweek* might be unsettling to those who subscribe to the tenets of positive psychology or to the information contained in many self-help books (a disclaimer: several of the books I have co-authored with Sam Goldstein would qualify in that category), but his ideas do provoke thought. Burkeman challenges some commonly held views, although some might argue that in voicing his position he distorts the ideas expressed in the self-help literature.

Burkeman sets the tone for his misgivings about the self-help field in the first paragraph of his article. “For the self-help industry, the most wonderful time of the year arrives not at Christmas but in the weeks immediately afterward—that segment of the calendar known to publishers and motivational speakers world-wide as “New Year, New You.” . . . The symbolic power of the date—1/1—is considerable: judging by past research, more than a third of Americans, including a majority of those under 45, will make New Year’s resolutions this year. Quitting smoking and losing weight, the same research suggests, will loom largest in their plans. Spoiler alert: most of them will fail.”

Burkeman continues in the same vein with other assertions. “The doctrine of positive thinking that underpins modern self-help rests on circular logic: when a given technique fails, the implication goes, it’s because you weren’t thinking positively enough and so you need positive thinking even more. In reality, psychological research increasingly suggests that repeating ‘affirmations’ makes people feel worse, that visualizing your ambitions can make you less motivated to achieve them, that goal setting can backfire, and that emotions can’t be controlled through sheer source of will.

“But the temptation to just try even harder can be hard to resist. ‘The key to success,’ argues the best-selling motivational writer Brian Tracy, ‘is to focus our conscious mind on things we desire, not things we fear.’ Messages like Tracy’s don’t keep on selling despite the fact that they don’t work, but rather *because* they don’t work: they deliver a short-lived mood boost, and when that fades, the most obvious way to revive it is to go back for more.”

I take issue with Burkeman’s blanket negative portrayal of self-help books and motivational speakers. It is overly simplistic to argue that a basic self-help premise is that if a technique fails, it is because the person wasn’t thinking positively enough and more positive thinking is required. As Sam Goldstein and I have written in our books about resilience, if a strategy is not effective, one should not resort to “trying harder” but rather adopt a problem-solving perspective and ask why the technique in question was not successful and what can one learn from the setback to use in future endeavors. Trying harder with an ineffective approach is not going to eventuate in a successful outcome. It will lead only to more frustration and the likelihood of abandoning all goals.

Burkeman offers other reasons for the failure of resolutions, including that “we’re notoriously prone to overestimating the effect that any one seemingly major change will actually have on our moods.” As an illustration he cites people who move to a new city, uprooting their current existence for a better life, “only to realize there’s one thing they couldn’t leave behind, themselves.”

Burkeman also takes aim at the need to “get motivated,” specifically mentioning Anthony Robbins whom he describes as “the positive thinker’s positive thinker—we can get ourselves to do anything!” He believes that the “Robbins philosophy merely strengthens the misleading belief that you need to feel motivated before taking action—

which is the biggest barrier to actually getting things done.” He contrasts the viewpoint adopted by Robbins with that of Japanese psychologist Shoma Morita who believes, “It’s perfectly possible to do what you know needs doing—to propel yourself to the gym, to open the laptop to work, to reach for the kale instead of the doughnuts—without ‘feeling motivated’ to do it.”

Critiquing the opposing views of Robbins and Morita about the role of motivation is well beyond the scope of this article. While I take issue with several of the points advanced by Burkeman, there is one piece of advice about which I am in total agreement. It parallels Ferrari’s recommendation noted in Teitell’s article, namely, that “people set small goals and reward themselves along the way.” Burkeman writes, “If you must make resolutions, it’s preferable to make tiny individual ones, repeatedly throughout the year, rather than multiple, ambitious ones at the start of it. Research by the psychologists Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, based on diary entries collected from hundreds of American employees, concludes that regular minor accomplishments—‘small wins’—contribute much more to happiness than do occasional, bigger ones: contrary to what you might expect, the satisfactions of a bigger achievement aren’t proportionately larger or more long-lasting.”

### **My Own Guidelines**

Reflecting on these different perspectives pertaining to New Year’s resolutions there are guidelines I suggest to patients and at my workshops. I believe they are very straightforward, practical, and achievable and focus on changing “negative scripts” in our lives. These guidelines include:

1. While the start of the New Year may seem to be a natural time to initiate changes, it is wise to reflect on our lifestyle throughout the year and make changes accordingly. Besides, if you decided at this time of year to wait until next January 1 to implement resolutions, you would have a wait of about 50 weeks. That would be the ultimate in procrastination.

2. Make a list of the things you would like to see be different in your life. In creating this list, consider what are the things that are most important to you (e.g., your marriage, your role as a parent, your health, your work) and ask, “Am I living my life in concert with my values?”

3. From this longer list select one or two items to focus on in the immediate future. Your choice should be guided by the following questions: “Is this truly one of the most important issues in my life?” “Is this something over which I have control to change?” “Do I believe it is my responsibility to change or do I harbor the notion that others should change first before I make any moves?” (A quick observation about this last question—if any of us are seeking our happiness by someone else changing first, we may be unhappy the rest of our lives.)

4. Once you have decided on at least one lifestyle change to confront, ask, “What are one or two small steps I can take immediately to begin the process of change?” In answering this question, consider the often stated advice, “Don’t bite off more than you can chew.” I have found one of the biggest errors that individuals make in modifying their lifestyle is attempting to change too much at once (e.g., this is very apparent in people who undertake “crash diets” or go from no exercise to an exercise regimen that is unrealistic). Think of the notion of “minor accomplishments” mentioned above.

5. After deciding upon what one or two changes you wish to make, create a plan of action to implement the steps necessary to begin to make these changes. Have short-term goals built in so that you can experience “minor accomplishments” along the way. For instance, as obvious as this may seem, if your goal is to walk three miles a day, begin walking a half-mile for the first few weeks. This will provide a sense of success and reinforce your increasing the distance to one mile and then two miles and eventually reaching your goal of three miles. Success breeds success.

6. Finally, if after a reasonable amount of time you are not able to attain the goal or goals you have set, think about an observation I made earlier in this article. Instead of judging yourself as a failure or believing you should “try harder,” it is much more productive to ask, “What can I learn from this experience and what can I do differently in the future so that the results may be more positive next time?” Both goals and/or strategies may have to be altered. Remember that resilient people learn from their setbacks, guided by a problem-solving mindset.

And throughout this process keep in mind that “we are the authors of our own lives.” While we may not have control over many events and situations that transpire in our lives, we have more control than we may recognize in terms of our attitude about and

response to these events.

**<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>**