

THERAPY MATTERS: Resolutions and Resolve

By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

The Winter Holidays are now largely behind us and many view the New Year as a natural time to make improvements in their lives. It begins with the promise of making changes that will make us ultimately happier, healthier and more fulfilled. The New Year can be viewed as a new chapter and there is typically a great deal of initial motivation to really do it right (finally). While there is no shortage of the type of goals/resolutions that people make each year, probably the most common are in the realm of health and fitness. Countless proclamations are made each January 1st – this will be the year I lose 50 lbs, stop eating junk food, go to the gym five days a week, become a vegetarian, run that marathon. There is unbridled enthusiasm and boundless hope as people embark on their paths to the promise of turning their resolution into reality.

But, human nature recoils against things that are too difficult for too long a period of time. While losing 50 pounds may be a noble and much needed endeavor, it does not happen overnight. No, it takes time and consistent commitment over the long haul. Fad diets of broth and grapefruit will not help anyone be successful because it cannot be maintained. We often see people in our practice who struggle mightily to stay on track with their ambitious goals. They feel like failures as they start something with the best of intent, only to give up and abandon ship. One of the primary reasons this happens is not that the goal is a bad one or unobtainable but that success does not happen overnight. The resolution becomes overwhelming and at that point just seems too hard to do. And so, it will just have to wait until next year when it is time to again set those goals!

One of the primary keys to success with any resolution is realistic goal-setting. Change is slow, particularly when it involves life-style components such as diet and exercise. We can both remember clients who were prone to making lofty promises to themselves. We have recollections of couch potatoes who vowed to work-out daily, and the fast-food addict who insisted he would bring a homemade salad for lunch each day. Work with these clients involved helping them soften their goals into something more obtainable. That way, they were more likely to stay the course. The change may be less dramatic, but it is more long-lasting. This is somewhat akin to the hundreds of people that flock to the gym with their new gym memberships each January. The mantra for regular gym-goers is to hang in there and be patient while you are waiting for your next piece of equipment; after all, most of these folks will be gone come March.

New Year's resolutions which are too ambitious lead, inevitably, to mistakes or "falling off the wagon". That person who insisted they would bring a homemade lunch to work every day instead of running out for fast food? They were destined to miss a day. And here is where it gets tricky, because it is what happens next that really determines if the person can get back on track. Many people in this situation would automatically blame themselves for messing up. Without even slowing down to think about it, their brain assigns a message – I screwed up, I'm a failure, I'll never succeed – and the end result is depressed mood, loss of ambition, and a giving up of their original goal.

There is an entire school of psychology that has been developed to explain such phenomenon. Cognitive-Behavioral Theory is based on the idea that it is not life's events that cause us to be depressed, anxious, or angry – rather, it is our *cognitions or thoughts* about such events which lead to our emotional or behavioral reactions. This theory goes further to explain that the vast majority of these cognitions happen so fast that we are not really aware of them – and thus they are often referred to as the "automatic thought process". Therapy from a cognitive perspective involves helping people first become more aware of these automatic thoughts and literally learning to "track" them. These thoughts can then be examined to see if they make sense or not. The process forces you to slow down and be aware of what is otherwise happening unconsciously in your mind – so that you can intervene. Dysfunctional thoughts or ideas can be replaced with more reality-based thinking: "I'm not a failure because I ate McDonald's today; look at the four days this week that I brought lunch from home!" This type of thought is more motivating and encourages the person to hang in there and keep going. We often counsel people to keep a diary to help them learn to track their thoughts and subsequent actions. In this way, people learn to slow down, look at what their thought was, the emotions they felt as a result of that thought, and the behavior that ensued. It becomes a concrete, practical way to start changing negative, self-defeating behaviors.

Of course not everyone is going to initiate cognitive-behavioral therapy for the sole purpose of examining their thought process in order to bring success to their New Year's resolutions. But everyone CAN pay attention to the language that they use in crafting their resolutions and make an effort to ensure that their goals are well thought-out and logical. "All or nothing" goals should be avoided – you're probably NOT going to take a walk every day after work, so why not aim for at least three times a week? There's a better chance that you'll be sticking with the plan come March that way. We recommend taking the time to write your resolutions down, which allows you the opportunity to really scrutinize them. If a big goal is on your list such as a major physical feat or substantial weight loss, it is helpful to break this down into manageable, quantifiable steps. Everyone who runs a marathon must first master one mile, than five...until mile 26.2 is reached. Resolutions and goals are much like running a very long race. You need to pace yourself, stay committed, congratulate successes, and acknowledge slips as mere deviations from the plan. To our knowledge, there is no perfect person but there ARE perfectly reasonable people. Be reasonable with yourself and your expectations and it is likely you will have the success you deserve.

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