



The Art of Ever-Lasting Change

As we shove off into another year, many of us do so holding fresh commitments to be different, to be better, or to change that troubling relationship.

January First seems as good a time as any to turn over a new leaf and make that annual commitment to change. We all stand so boldly at the starting line knowing that this is the year that the commitment to change will stick. The pressing reality we face is that gyms are crowded in January and therapist's phones begin to ring more frequently come February first. The following piece will look at why some people find success in making change, while others struggle. We will also provide a simple plan that can tip the odds in your favor and will highlight when it might be time to seek outside help to address what is blocking your efforts to change.

To briefly summarize decades of research lead by James Prochaska: people are successful in changing difficult behaviors because they are "ready to change." This news is at once infuriating and liberating. If you are struggling, it will infuriate, but if you are ready, the battle is halfway won. Think about an aspect of your life where you have successfully changed a troubling behavior (or think of

witnessing a friend or family member overcome a difficult problem). The path to that success was likely met with difficulty, yet you (or they) preserved. This motivation is easily described with the Alcoholics Anonymous adage, "they were sick and tired of being sick and tired." When we have "had enough" of what is troubling or bothering us, we are often able to easily overcome any setback that might be blocking our path to change. The pain of what we are moving away from is great enough to motivate us when we are met with difficulty. To revisit that crowded gym in January example: these are the people that will push through the excuses of being sore, or not having enough time, and be in the gym for the rest of the year. What happens to the people who give up?

There are many of us who will get held up at a roadblock and feel like we are failing our new commitments. The reason many people turn back to old behavior at the first sign of difficulty is described by the phenomenon known as "learned helplessness. Simply put, many of us have

a history of trying to make changes when we weren't quite ready to change. We carry with us the history of all those "failed" attempts, and as soon as the going gets tough we say to ourselves, "who am I to think I could actually stay committed to the gym, or quit smoking, or stick to that diet." More quickly than you can think it, your brain and body are easily ready to slip back into the exact habit you were trying to change. It requires less energy to remain the same than it does to move forward with a new behavior. By innocently making poorly timed attempts at changing difficult behaviors, some people have accidentally conditioned themselves to believe that real change is impossible, and that they are the type of person incapable of "sticking to it."

The easiest way to help you make a plan to "stick to it," is to tell you that the path will have difficulties and to prepare yourself to meet them head on. When the moment comes where you stumble, rather than slipping back into an old behavior (learned helplessness), remind yourself that you have been making a change and that doubt or struggle is part of that process. Move forward rather than back. Let's revisit the gym example to see how this works: You have made a commitment to join the gym and get in better shape. On January first you go to the gym for an hour. You do the same thing for 5 days in a row and then, on the sixth day you sleep through your alarm and miss the gym. Your head is likely to chime in and say, "See, I told you so...you tried this last year and weren't able to keep the commitment to going to the gym. You may as well give up because you are not the type of person who can make lasting change." Has it happened to you before? That's the learned helplessness talking! A different way of looking at the situation would be to say to your self, "I went to the gym for five days in a row. That's a real change from last year. It's a bummer I slept through the alarm but I'll go for a walk at lunchtime and pick up again tomorrow." This is an example of how changing the way we view our setbacks at roadblocks can help us move forward.

Simple Plan

1. Set a day a few weeks into the future to begin (pick a day that isn't emotionally loaded).
2. As you lead up to the target day, focus on the NEGATIVE aspects of the behavior you are trying to change (for example, if you will be quitting smoking, focus on how much cigarettes cost, or how they make your clothes smell).

3. As you lead up to the target day focus on how much better you will feel when you can make the change (once I quit smoking my clothes will smell better).

4. Prepare yourself for the roadblocks with a backup plan for how you will reframe the setback (If you smoke a cigarette on day 6, remind yourself that you just went 5 days without smoking and move forward, not back to daily smoking).

5. Celebrate your successes by focusing on the positive aspects of the changes you are making (if your clothes aren't smelling like smoke, are people noticing? Is there more money in your wallet?)

For some people making changes to difficult behaviors seems simple, for others the same change seems nearly impossible. If you find yourself stumbling over the same roadblocks this year that you have in years past, calling a therapist is a good way to move toward lasting change. Oftentimes a therapist can quickly help you identify old patterns and ways in which you continue to stumble in places where there is a new way around old struggles.

Our practice is rooted in the philosophy that the best therapy begins with the right fit between therapist and client. If you are struggling and looking for help making lasting change to something you are struggling with, we will be happy to help you move forward with those goals.

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