

Masters of Resolutions.

by Beverley N. Mucciardi, LCSW, ACSW

Successful resolutions are made and implemented one or two at a time.

Sitting together on the couch in my office in late January were a pair of sisters, both attractive, beautifully groomed, articulate, married women in their 40's with charming Georgia accents and both considerably overweight.

Every year since they were teenagers, the two of them and their mother had made New Year's resolutions to lose weight. Every year began with some success and ended with each of them adding more pounds. The previous year when the sisters each had their annual January checkups, they had similar diagnoses: elevated cholesterol, hypertension and hypoglycemia. The treatment plan was weight loss, exercise and medications. They were distressed when they recognized the medications as "Mom's drugs" and had vowed to manage their health with diet and exercise. Their doctor agreed to see what they could accomplish in a year before insisting they begin medications. Mary Kay had little change in weight and worse lab results; Cindy had gained 9 pounds! Now both were taking medications they did not want to be on and suffering minor side effects.

Their obese, diabetic, 68-year-old mother, had suffered a major stroke the previous spring, followed by congestive heart failure and other complications. She had been hospitalized three times that year and was in a rehabilitation facility. "Neither of us wants to end up like our mother, but my sister is saying that it is our fate. I won't accept that! Our doctor said you might be able to help us keep our resolutions. Can you?" asked Mary Kay, the elder sister. "If you're willing to make some changes, I can coach you to help yourselves," I told her and they both nodded, if a bit doubtfully.

These sisters were a study in contrasts. Mary Kay was taller, a brunette with brown eyes and the personality of the corporate executive that she was. She was accustomed to setting goals and attaining them. Her inability to keep her



health resolutions in the same way she managed business challenges was extremely frustrating. Cindy, a blue-eyed blonde, was the mother of three children. Her husband and their kids were the focus of her life. She wanted to be healthy for her family, did not want her daughters to deal with the stress she and Mary Kay were going through as a result of their mother's illnesses. She also remembered the painful teasing she had endured in elementary school and her horrible adolescent self-disgust. She knew she could best help her already "plumpish" daughters escape similar torments by making changes herself.

Mary Kay had efficiently printed out her resolutions in the form of a spreadsheet. She had identified seven life areas and made resolutions for improvements in each of them in the form of goals – major goals. Lose 80 pounds; go to the gym

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5-6 days a week; spend quality time with my husband; etc. She had directed her sister to come similarly prepared. Cindy sheepishly pulled two rather crumpled pieces of notebook paper out of her stylish handbag. Her sister's distain was unspoken, but unmistakable, and Cindy mumbled that she hadn't had time to do a spreadsheet. Then she defiantly declared that she had made resolutions in all of the seven categories. Cindy's resolutions were as admirable, as grand and as unworkable as her sister's. In response to my question, Cindy proudly said they'd been making "complete life resolutions" every year since college. When I asked how this approach had worked out, the response was a silent shrug. Both of them seemed intensely interested in studying the carpet.

Making a resolution is basically a way of telling ourselves that we intend to change a habit, or more accurately, a whole constellation of habits. Most of us have no appreciation for how challenging it is to change habits. Think about the power and usefulness of habit. This morning I woke, showered, made and ate breakfast, brushed my teeth, dressed and drove to my office. All of these activities, from turning off my alarm to driving my car, were easy because they are supported by habits, patterns laid down in my nervous system. To understand what I mean, consider how much effort a toddler puts into brushing his teeth or buttoning her blouse. All of that effort, and all of the mistakes and corrections that a little person makes over weeks and months, create neural patterns which support habitual behaviors that adults take for granted.

The way we eat, how we celebrate holidays, how active we are, all of these are the result of neural patterns built up over years of repetition. It requires a lot of effort to change behaviors as basic as what and how much we eat, how we handle stress, even how we manage the discomfort of change. For this reason, successful resolutions are made and implemented one or two at a time. Otherwise, we get exhausted, burnt out, and slip back into familiar habits. If the resolution is to improve health by losing weight, it may be useful to have a long-term goal like Mary Kay's 80 pound target, but that large goal is best broken down into small attainable goals within the larger goal. The sisters agreed that their most important goal was health. Their homework assignment was to develop a plan of small, specific changes to their regular routine, which would be a start toward a mini goal, that each was to identify. I asked them to do the task separately, and to refrain from comparing notes until our next session.

Mary Kay's revised resolution was to lose 10 pounds in 30 days by making major changes in her diet and

exercising at the gym 5 days a week. Cindy's was to lose 1 pound a week. Her plan involved walking with her husband and kids 3-4 times a week, taking a weekly yoga class, and eating fruit when she craved something sweet. Not perfect, these were more realistic and attainable plans. We spent the second session discussing how they could set themselves up for success instead of failure.

The most important skill is to make resolutions and plans to implement them that suit you, not someone else. Mary Kay wanted Cindy to use her plan. That would have set them both up for failure because Cindy felt "little" when Mary Kay told her what to do, and Mary Kay used a great deal of her energy "being responsible" for other people.

The next skill is to refuse failure! It is important to expect obstacles and plan for them (What will you eat at the party?). Slipups or backslides can be used as an opportunity to learn more about what triggers and maintains old patterns of self-sabotaging behavior. They are simply signals that some adjustments need to be made to the plan, not the excuse to quit or label yourself a loser. Be persistent!

The third skill set we discussed were some techniques to stay motivated. Write out goals and post them in a public part of your home as a self-reminder and to encourage others to support you; ask for regular encouragement from trusted friends and family members. Use affirmations and visualization (see yourself stepping on the scale and feel the happiness when it reads 5 pounds less!). Reward yourself as you achieve your mini goals.

Throughout the year, Mary Kay and Cindy continued to come for sessions every three or four weeks, sometimes together, sometimes alone. By the fall, they were both able to discontinue medications. In December, they declared themselves Masters of Resolutions and delightedly laughed about needing a new category of resolution to reign in their appetite for sleek new clothes! ●



about beverley...

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