

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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Services We Offer

Individual Therapy
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Speaking
Evaluations/Assessments

Effective Change Process: Choices that Work Resolutions, Irritations, and Desired Change



Welcome to 2012! In considering what article to put forth to accompany the new year, my mind predictably considered the all-too-familiar topic of the "New Year's Resolution." Just as quickly as this came to mind, palpable irritation rose within me. Perhaps I exaggerate, but I suspect that my feelings to some degree reflect the collective unconscious on this subject. That is, I imagine many people experience irritability when they consider the proposition of staying "resolved" to a new behavior. New Year's Resolutions hold the novel excitement of a possible improved you, yet the unfortunate tendency to become obsolete as quickly as yesterday's newest technology. Being prone to ponder such things, I have wondered how a resolution representing all things new and bright can be transferred to the junk pile of good intentions so quickly. One of the problems with a New Year's Resolution is that a new behavior must be sustained for some length of time until it becomes a consistent, repetitive behavior. This is certainly possible, and many people are able to sustain a new behavior with daily practice, over a period of time.

Some sources say that a new behavior takes approximately 21 to 28 days to become a habit. Conversely, others contend that the 21 to 28 day threshold for habit-formation is a myth, because the supporting research is limited to a very specific group of subjects. The studies cannot possibly be generalized to all kinds of habit-formation, nor all the different kinds of people attempting to form a given change of habit. Repetition over time can be effective in rooting behavior, but many factors affect how long this actually takes. The 21-28 day threshold is far too simplistic and reductionistic. Sometimes we can be too rigid in our expectations and this can frustrate change.

Considering Two Forces of Change

Human beings tend to gravitate toward simple and direct answers. We want simple steps that lead straight to our end goal. We tend to become frustrated when obstacles arise and goal-satisfaction is delayed. We tend to hold minimal if any appreciation for potential barriers that could delay or hinder us in achieving our goal. In considering how we achieve change in our lives, let's examine two sets of forces. These two forces are the "external" and the "internal." The external refers to all forces in our environment, that which is outside of ourselves. Simple examples of external forces that affect us when pursuing change include situational circumstances, people, availability of resources, and information.

External forces also include that which is perceivable as well as that which is unperceivable; this can range on a continuum. For example, let's suppose that you have a goal to be more loving towards your romantic partner. The target behavior for that goal is to initiate giving hugs to the family member at least ten times a week. You would like to incorporate hugging into your repertoire of how you express love to your partner. A perceivable external force may be that your family member is presently three feet away and within approaching distance. An external force that would not initially be perceivable but might become perceivable once you draw closer is that your partner has been drinking heavily and has alcohol on his/her breath. **Internal** forces refer to forces residing within us. Examples of internal forces include physical health, stored information, emotional memory, and expectations. Just like external forces, internal forces may be perceivable or unperceivable. Furthermore, these internal forces fall on a continuum of consciousness and awareness. Let's continue with the example of a goal to express love through hugging your partner ten times a week. You may already recall that you have an aversion to the smell of alcohol emanating from your partner, and thus this is a deterrent. You may or may not have full awareness of emotional memory and related insight into why this disturbs you. You also may not be fully conscious to the degree to which you are affected in an exchange with your partner. Regardless of your level of awareness, this internal factor will influence the overall goal.

Interplay between External and Internal Forces

Both external and internal forces impact whether we change and to what degree we change. We will have varying degrees of ability to perceive or be conscious of both internal and external forces. In individual therapy, much of an individual's work addresses awareness of both external and internal forces. Equally important, if not more so, is helping an individual to become more conscious of the interplay between the internal and external forces. Distortions in awareness becomes integral to this process, as many times we engage with others and our world out of a distorted or inaccurate perception of self, others, situations, and so on.

Treatment for

Depression
Anxiety / Panic Attacks
Eating Disorders
Bi-polar Disorder
Obsessive –
Compulsive
Disorder
Compulsive Behaviors
such as sexual
addiction
Post-traumatic Stress
Disorder from past
abuse
Ryotional issues
Adjustment to life
changes

Ages Served

Adult
Adolescent
Children ages 10 & up

Considering Control, Choice, and Gratitude

When you are trying to make a change in your life, three considerations about external and internal forces may be helpful for you. First of all, as you are able to perceive a given force, *consider whether this is something that is within your control.* For example, let’s say that you have a goal to reduce your weight by eating healthier, more nutritionally responsible meals. An external force outside of your control might include a well-intentioned co-worker that surprises the office with Monday morning donuts. Their decision was outside of your control. Your internal feelings about this may also be out of your control. However, your *response* can be adjusted to keep on task with your goal and can be within your control. Many times, we do not realize that we do not have to be dictated by our feelings. They can be informative, but what we do with them is our choice.

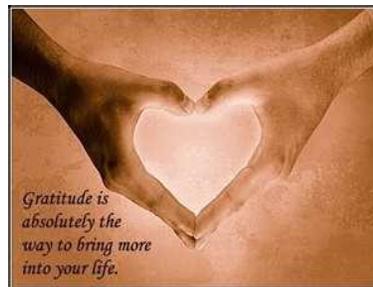
Secondly, *consider* what you can do actively to *assert* control and buffer yourself from potential frustrations. As we learn to accept when something is outside of our control, we can also use our energy to refocus on how to maintain movement toward our goal. Many times we feel powerless and frustrated by external forces because they can seem to ambush us or surprise us. We may become angry or upset at the external force itself or at ourselves for the limitations we have in dealing with the external force. In the case of the goal to lose weight, a balanced approach is to accept the reality that at your company, other individuals may not share your goals and values about food. You can also accept that it is a normal response for you to feel frustrated by this and to experience this as a struggle. When you accept what is occurring in the moment, you can then reinvest your attention and energy back into goal-reinforcing behaviors. Many times, we lose momentum because we are caught in obsessing about what we or others have done...and we become stuck. As you are aware of the food culture of your office, you can commit to bringing a substitute snack in lieu of surprise offerings by the staff. Another idea is to tell co-workers about your goal; this gives them the opportunity to alter their behavior around you if they so choose.

Thirdly, *examine* what your initial reaction is to a given force and *realize* that you have a *choice* about the direction of your response. Identify...what is my physical reaction to this external force? What is my emotional reaction? Is this amplified or extreme? What am I telling myself about this? Is that accurate? Ask yourself... is my attitude a stumbling block to my goal or is it liberating me to change? I can choose to harbor anger about the perceived insensitivity of my co-workers and dwell in resentment. I can use others as an excuse to give up because I tell myself I will be constantly faced with such challenges. Or, I can release my frustration and then move to a helpful, positive response.

This brings us to the last point: choose to commit to an attitude of grace and gratitude. Consider choosing an *orientation of grace and gratitude* that will extend to yourself and to others. Gratitude carries energy that exacts change. Why so? One reason is because gratitude and thankfulness are noncontrolling. When we hold on to hard feelings, we are in a mode of self-control and protection. Our energy will be conserved to self-focus. Constantly turning inward to focus on perceived injustices can be very limiting. Likewise, lack of forgiveness is limiting. Usually, if we cannot forgive, we are still feeling the need to self-protect.

Conversely, when we acknowledge the feelings and release them, we move from self-absorption and self-protection to action. We orient ourselves outward to more growth and opportunity. A grateful heart may acknowledge the frustration but choose to appreciate the friendly, sharing nature of the office staff. A grateful heart may choose to be thankful for their generosity and how this stretches and challenges him or her to be generous as well. Perhaps in keeping with goals, the grateful person decides to bring a healthy treat for everyone instead of just for self. Instead of holding annoyance, a grateful person may be tickled by the evident healing and creativity within that can extend grace, not irritation.

This growth is encouraging; this gratitude leads to movement and desired change. Further, as you orient outward in grace and thanksgiving, the effects are experienced not only by yourself, but by others in many positive ways. That, my friends, is a powerful force, powerful choice, and powerful change!



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