



Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

Mental Health Quick Notes

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The Challenge of Change

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A few months ago, many of us made a post holiday list of New Year's Resolutions. We made all kinds of promises to ourselves: lose weight, get organized, maintain an exercise routine, watch less TV, or improve our relationships. We vowed to live more effectively, more meaningfully, more healthfully. Replacing last year's calendar denotes the passing of time, it calls us to take inventory, asking ourselves how we are using this year, this day.

As we are now well into 2011, most of us are by now, habituated to writing the correct year when we date a document. Perhaps then, as it is still early in the year, this is a good time to reflect upon the promises we made to ourselves, and to take an accounting of how we are managing. Which of those resolutions have we been able to keep? Where, and why, are we stuck? As we celebrate our strengths and acknowledge our struggles, we might consider the challenges inherent in the process of change.

Change is rarely easy. We fall into habits, and generally, they are not all that easy to alter. To prove the point, simply move a waste basket to other than its usual place, and you'll be reminded of just how hard it is to change a pattern. Try it, and you'll chuckle as you lean to toss that piece of trash into a can that's no longer where it used to be!

What makes even the simplest change difficult? Why is it that making significant change can require thoughtfulness, strength, compassion toward our selves, even courage? There are many reasons; some are obvious, others, less so.

Change begins with a confrontation, either from within or from another person, that some aspect of how we are living is limiting, counterproductive, or unhealthy. Confrontation, whether it comes from inside ourselves or from another, is never comfortable. It creates emotional disequilibrium as we let in the information that all is *not* fine. Comfort with the familiar

and complacency with ourselves are replaced with uncertainty and anxiety.

Sometimes the realization that things need to change can come quite painfully. In the addictions community, that is called "hitting bottom," which means that a pattern of events or an incident resulting from substance abuse is so unacceptable, the addict finally faces their problem. There are ways in which all of us, with or without addictions, can "hit bottom." It might be that the number on the scale is alarming, our relationships are clearly not working, or credit card bills are making our overspending apparent.

Sometimes, the process of change begins with tremendous anger toward ourselves, coupled with self-loathing or self-rejection. Although self-confrontation is difficult, it can still be managed with kindness toward ourselves and acceptance of our humanity. Even if painfully facing the need to change, we can temper that with self-love. A positive mindset will set us on a course of change that will feel more encouraging, forgiving of our imperfections, and better able to maintain curiosity and hope when we backslide. This is not a question of making excuses for things that need to be faced. Rather, it is an act of responsibility to take ourselves seriously, and out of self-respect and self-care, to attend to the ways in which we need to do better.

Consider, for example, people struggling to lose weight. There are those who harbor very negative feelings toward themselves because they are overweight. Others, however, out of self-love, want to lose weight and take better care of their bodies because they value themselves. Those with an angry mindset might suffer with rigid all-or-nothing thinking and become more easily discouraged. On the other hand, approaching weight loss from a stance of self-acceptance, one's sense of worth is not contingent upon a number on the scale. "Whether I weigh twenty pounds more or less, I am still the same inherently worthy human." With this attitude, it is much easier

to remain internally encouraging. And when we backslide, rather than hating ourselves, we can adopt an attitude of forgiving curiosity as to why the slip occurred when it did. For example, "self-haters" might label their behavior and themselves a "failure," and see themselves as a "loser," or "never able to change." The person with a self-accepting attitude, is better able to bear regret, and to think about the emotional, social, and physical circumstances that contributed to disappointing behavior. Self-knowledge can deepen, and a set of coping skills to deal more effectively with similar circumstances can emerge.

Making change can present challenges in other ways. Doing something unfamiliar is often unsettling. It is uncomfortable to bear the sense of newness as we join a gym, enter a new worship community, or begin a class. And, at the most basic level, the discomfort might come from simply facing the weather to get out and exercise.

Sometimes, habit change can lead to a process of self-discovery and insight. Although enlightening, that process is not always easy. Cessation of a self-defeating habit can entail facing how that habit actually offers self-soothing. For example, eating chocolate when upset, overspending when discouraged, using alcohol or drugs to numb pain, are all, at their core, attempts to manage difficult feelings. So when someone stops a behavior that they leaned on when distressed, they also need to learn healthy and effective ways to manage their difficult emotions.

Sometimes, in order to get unstuck, we need to find out whether there is some sort of emotional "payoff," some hidden "benefit" to a behavior that on the surface, appears self-defeating. There may be some underlying "need" for some act of self-sabotage to, in a way, take care of or protect ourselves. While at the surface level, even as we tell ourselves that we absolutely need to change, we might not realize that there is some way that staying stuck is protective. For example, the inability to change may be masking our

The Challenge of Change (cont'd)

deep fears of success, secret terror about being in an intimate relationship, or anxiety about letting ourselves live in a body we think of as more sexually attractive. These sorts of unarticulated and unconscious fears might be what is driving our self-defeating patterns.

Frank drinks because he "believes" that his feelings are too painful to bear. So having a few drinks "solves" that problem. Deciding to stop drinking will involve getting to know himself, and developing the strength to handle and soothe those difficult emotions without alcohol.

Sandy can't seem to get a program of going to the gym underway, because to do so, she would have to "know" that she matters enough to invest a little time and money in herself. She has deep confusion and pain over whether it's okay to take care of her own needs. Growing up, she learned to put everyone else's needs first, was valued by her parents as a caretaker, and shamed for self-interest. So in taking a step toward self-care, she might experience anxiety as she challenges the internal relational picture that she learned as a child, that is, she feels safe denying her own needs and taking care of others.

Patrick has a longstanding pattern of undermining relationships, because deep inside, he holds confusing messages and experiences he had as a child with his toxic parents, and he is afraid of trusting someone else to love him. He is also unsure that he is even loveable. So he sabotages relationships so that he never has to face the pain of someone else hurting him. But he is lonely, and wants love

in his life.

Change can require an exploration of those unconscious internal resistances, "alerts," really, that contribute to our clinging to familiar, but self-defeating patterns or behaviors. This can call upon the courage to face our own story, and discover internal wounds we may be carrying. The goal, of course, is to take care of the pain in a way that is not self-defeating.

One theoretical model of change called the Stages of Change Model identifies five stages we go through in making changes. They are: (1) **Precontemplation** (when we have not acknowledged that there is a need for change), (2) **Contemplation** (a problem has been recognized but we are not yet ready to take it on), (3) **Preparation** (we get ready to make a change), (4) **Action** (making behavior change), (5) **Maintenance** (we work on keeping the changes made). Change is often accompanied by relapse in which we move back and forth between the stages. In this sense, change is not a linear process but may involve starts, stops and reversals (DiClemente, 2003). A sixth stage, **Transcendence** has been proposed by Kern (2010). This term is used when one has really left the old patterns behind and has in some sense a new "self." That is, for example, after a former smoker has not had a cigarette for many years, the label "smoker" is no longer a part of their identity.

It is important to keep in mind that change does not necessarily take place in a simple linear fashion. We all take steps backward with making change. If we understand and

accept this, when we backslide, we will get back on course more quickly. On the other hand, we think in terms of "all or nothing", we'll feel defeated when we get off course, and will be more at risk of abandoning our efforts to change.

Sometimes, making change seems nearly impossible. If we make the journey with an open and loving attitude toward ourselves, the willingness to face hidden resistances to change, and a realistic expectation of the steps to achieving change, the process will be more enlightening and successful.

Turning to someone for help can often make a difference. Many types of support groups are available in our area, and online. And if something seems to be contributing to self-defeating patterns, a professional therapist can help unravel some of the mysteries of what makes a particular course of change difficult, and help clarify how to move forward.

References

DiClemente, C. (2003) *Addiction and change*. New York: Guilford Press
Kern, 2010. Cited in ADDICTION-INFO.ORG2010. STAGES OF CHANGE MODEL Retrieved December 2, 2010. Web site: <http://www.addictioninfo.org/articles/1111/Stages-of-Change-Model/Page1.html>

Additional Reading

Kasl, C. (2002) *If the Buddha got stuck*. New York, Penguin Books

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