Endings, Beginnings, and Middles

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A New Year is a new beginning. The New Year is celebrated in all cultures with many different rituals, including parties, dancing, fireworks, and special foods. These traditions evolve from the belief that events occurring on New Year’s Day set the pattern for the rest of the year. In many cultures, people perform rituals, such as making noise to keep evil spirits or bad luck away, to invite wealth, good health, and harmony into their homes.

The start of any year is a good time to reflect, plan, and decide what you are going to accomplish during the coming months. Many of us may perceive that something needs to change. Every new year, we feel compelled to reinvent ourselves as perfect physical, intellectual, and emotional beings. We promise to shape up, to learn a foreign language, or read the classic novels, to be more patient; to start doing something healthy and make improvements in our lives.

Most of us think that we can change our lives if we just summon the willpower. It has been stated that 80 percent of us think if we try even harder this time around, we can make the change. Research suggests that the individual who believes that self-control is something dynamic, changing, and unlimited, will tend to make resolutions. On the other hand, those who believe that we all are born with a limited amount of self-control and that people cannot change tend not to make resolutions. In other words, individuals with high self-efficacy attribute failure to insufficient effort, while individuals with low self-efficacy attribute failure to deficient ability. Higher self-efficacy generally is correlated with a greater likelihood of achieving one’s goals.

Despite everyone’s best intentions, we all know that what tends to happen. Our lives generally go on as before. Not getting started is common. We slack off or give up on our resolutions. When we don’t see quick changes, usually sometime in February, we lose our motivation, or we get busy and distracted by the everyday tasks of our lives. Often, we may feel disappointed and dissatisfied, experiencing a sense of defeat and guilt because we broke our promises to ourselves.

In actual fact, most of us are just bogged down in the middle of the journey. New Year’s resolutions are not events but ongoing processes, very much like a good book. The enticing beginning is a promise—not about how the story will end, but what kind of experience it will bring. The middle of the story sets the foundation, builds on the promise, and sustains the story until the ending delivers on the initial promise. In the middle is the hard work. The reality is that time and schedule conflicts surface, momentum may slow, critics attack, and doubt and negativity prevail. The middle is an uncomfortable place, unclear, foggy, and uncertain. Everything looks like a failure in the middle.

Following through on a New Year’s resolution typically means working to lay down new habits that conflict with old ingrained behaviors. Most of us are unprepared to do the constant work required to accomplish those benefits. When things get emotional or painful or uncomfortable or inconvenient, we struggle, often slacking off or letting go of the ultimate goal.

Overcoming Procrastination

It is not easy to do something different, and making a change is challenging. We may just forget about it or procrastinate, hoping things will spontaneously get better or be different. One common cause of procrastination is lack of time and feeling overwhelmed by the task. When we feel stressed, worried, or anxious, we cannot focus, and we feel too physically and/or emotionally drained. We put things off in favor of doing something that is more enjoyable or that we are more comfortable doing.

Perfectionism is one of the roots of procrastination. A perfectionist’s approach represents a mismatch between action and expectation. Seeking perfection is time-stealing and energy-draining. Because perfectionists strive for unachievable outcomes, nothing is good enough. For fear of not being able to perform “perfectly,” perfectionists will often fail to complete—or even start endeavors. When the focus of attention is on what’s wrong or what’s not working rather than what is good, we feel bad when we make a mistake and berate ourselves mercilessly.

Change is always a threat. Seeking a change for the wrong reasons also sets us up for failure. Resolving to lose weight, stop smoking or...
drinking, exercising more because someone else thinks we should, or we know it is good for us, is seldom an incentive for success. Half-hearted participation never works, and it is very easy to find excuses to forget about your resolution.

With every change a process occurs: an ending, middle, and new beginning. A new resolution is making a promise to yourself—one you want badly enough to pay the price in time and effort to pursue your goal. It can mean the ending to something else. Endings always are associated with the sense of a loss of the way things have been—things that are comfortable and difficult to let go of.

The Middle Can Be a Struggle

The middle is struggling to learn and adjust to new thinking, attitudes, and behaviors. Maintaining new behaviors is highly susceptible to interference and relapse. Studies suggest that those who are most successful in making a change are committed and persistent and willing to be flexible. They expect obstacles and plan for the bumps in the road to success, they learn from missteps, and they celebrate each milestone. Individuals tend to learn the most from mistakes, how to do things and how not to do things. Mistakes ultimately contribute to better outcomes.

The middle requires a special sense of balance and involves awareness of several factors such as identifying frustrations and stressors. Has the resolution changed in value to you? Is the environment different? An environment can be anything, internal or external, that works for you or raises barriers to your success. Identify where there are struggles, regroup to remove the roadblocks, surround yourself with supporters who cheer you on, and stick with it. Recognize the struggles of the middle, be patient and give it some time, and believe in your successful new beginning.

Some people start by writing down all the things they wish to change or accomplish. Others just make a simple pact with themselves to “do better.” Regardless of your preference, your resolution should be to improve yourself either physically, emotionally, or mentally. It should be inspiring to you, not the result of social pressure. Your goal can be small and simple such as resolving to learn something new, smiling at least once a day, or volunteering at the local soup kitchen. It may also be the big incentive moment, a cause-and-effect chain triggered by a life-altering event. But, it must be doable, something within your control, and the best use of your time.

Starting something new is most powerful when you focus on what you choose to create. You should constantly work on your self-improvement project. Frequently people get stuck with a certain way of looking at a situation or experience. Their perspective becomes in some way disabling. You become stuck in the middle. When faced with a barrier, think of it as a new starting point.

Your ability to reframe the experience in a new way provides a fresh perspective and a sense of renewed possibility. Be kind to yourself and recognize it takes time to become accustomed to new habits. The middle journey between what is behind and what’s ahead is not a phase to impatiently race through.

A successful New Year’s resolution is a learning process. We are embarking on something new, and making mistakes is part of finding our way. Changing habits is taking on new skills. We need to make room to learn, see progress, dust off our mistakes, and celebrate our successes. That’s what learning is: knowing our goal, not taking on too much at one time, and making use of the “do over” rule when we need it. It’s always being mindful of what we are doing when we are doing it, and to ask ourselves if it’s really what we want or need to be doing right then.

And while we’re at it, who says that resolutions need to be saved up until the New Year? Resolve to think about how to make your life better, not just once a year, but every day. Every change starts with the first day.

Resources


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