

# Imaging Success for Our New Year's Resolutions

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**T**he start of a new year has a special significance to people all around the world. It is when we bid adieu to the year gone by, and welcome the prospects for a bright new year ahead. We assess the things in our lives we want to improve and review our accomplishments—and failures—of the previous year. It is an optimistic time where we desire to bring into fruition the things we long for but have not yet achieved in the past. We resolve to make those things come true and we make promises to ourselves to achieve those cherished goals by changing anything in our behavior or beliefs which may have interfered with obtaining them. It is a time of fresh beginnings filled with hope for a better future in the year ahead.

Making personal resolutions on New Year's Day is an ancient tradition which started with the Babylonians of Mesopotamia. Ever pragmatic, among discovered Babylonian records we find that one of their most common resolutions was to return borrowed farm equipment. The early Anglo-Saxons, who migrated west across northern Europe and ultimately settled in England, brought with them an end of year festival called *Yule*, in which they looked forward to a fertile and peaceful season in the coming year. The boar was an important symbol in their celebrations and they would make solemn *boar oaths* for the coming year.

The practice of making formal vows to better oneself is historically found not only in secular traditions but in religious rituals as well. For example, during the high holy days of the Hebrew faith, Jews reflect upon and atone for the sins they committed in the previous year and pray for forgiveness as well as offer forgiveness to others for their prior transgressions. It is a sacred time of fasting and soul searching where they vow to make changes necessary to right their wrongdoings in the year ahead. Similarly, during the Christian period of Lent, Christians enter a state of holy sacrifice by fasting so that they may focus and reflect upon their connection to the divine as well as their own self-improvement.

The key element to a New Year's resolution that sets it apart from other resolutions is that it is made in anticipation of the New Year and symbolizes fresh beginnings. Typical New Year's resolutions deal with: wanting to change our emotional patterns of behavior; changing self-defeating habits; or initiating projects or new involvements, all of which we hope will improve both our lives and those of others. Some of the most common resolutions include improving our health by setting

such goals as losing weight, exercising regularly, drinking less alcohol, or stopping smoking. Other resolutions deal with changing behaviors such as saving money, improving one's career, getting more education, learning something new (such as a new language), or getting more organized. Other common resolutions include personal promises to change or control one's inner emotions, engage in stress reduction practices, become more independent, be kinder to one's employees, not yell at one's children, etc., etc.

It is estimated that only 12 percent of people actually achieve their goals. A study by Richard Wiseman of the University of Bristol showed that 78 percent of those who set New Year's resolutions fail. He found that among the men who achieved their goals, 22 percent did so by setting small specific goals instead of a large, vague one (e.g., losing a pound a week versus vowing to lose weight). Women in the success group succeeded 10 percent more when they made their intentions known and received support from their friends to persist in the face of setbacks.

So, the statistics of likely success of New Year's resolutions is discouraging. Why is this? One reason: behavioral change is difficult because psychological resistances such as low self-esteem, fear of failure, or even fear of success, all too often get in the way. Thus, some people do not change because to do so would be in conflict with their self-image (for better or worse), or with how others might negatively react to them if they did change. Others may experience anger, need for control, perfectionism, laziness and a host of other negative emotions that reflect habitual patterns of behavior evident in other areas of their lives. At first, such people truly intend and desire to change and they begin to engage in the new positive behavior. Unfortunately, their resolve is soon sabotaged by their ingrained, habitual negative emotions or state(s) of mind, as demonstrated by two recent clients, both of whom had self-defeating emotions and mental patterns which originated in their pasts.

Client A believed she could not attract men because she was overweight. Her New Year's resolution: trim down. She immediately lost ten pounds but then the pounds suddenly crept back. In therapy, we determined she really didn't want to be thin: she subconsciously felt that if she did and still didn't find a mate, she must be inherently unlovable. Her subconscious solution to this untenable dilemma: sabotage her conscious best intentions. Male client B's New Year's resolution was to stop smoking, and he did—for six weeks. Then, after one stressful day at work, he reverted to smoking. We

realized he'd never learned how to deal with stress of any kind. All stress terrified him, rendering him helpless. Stressed out and helpless was what he'd always been as a child due to his erratic and abusive alcoholic parents. So, whenever he experienced stress he smoked to cover it up. Moral: we all start with good intentions, but our familiar, albeit negative emotions from past events often interfere with our ability to persevere in attaining our goals.

Dr. Akhter Ahsen, the leading theoretician and developer of the field of Eidetic Image psychology devised an imagery exercise used in the treatment of addictions that can be applied to people who need help keeping their resolutions. During the exercise a person can see the reality of their present circumstances if their negative behavior does not cease, as well as its future ramifications in their life.

Dr. Ahsen discovered that people constantly play out future scenarios subliminally in their minds and when these scenes are made conscious people can then realign themselves towards real change. The exercise connects one with the futuristic part of their mind in the precise area where a personal failing appears to manifest itself—and is defended by denial or emotional blocks. One is asked to see image scenarios of a ten year period of what might occur if they continue their negative behaviors (here, smoking, not losing weight, not saving money, etc.). The vision of future events is always operating within the current conscious mind in subliminal vague or vivid images involving negative or false positive anticipations.

The exercise asks the person to imagine what happens each year that the negative habit continues over the next ten years. The result is that one can then see the consequences of not changing. The person's underlying emotions also surface, such as, anger, anxiety, numbness, hope or whatever other might arise. In this manner, one becomes rooted in reality and thus can overcome obstacles to success. As each image is brought to the surface to be explored it makes clear the various areas in a person's life that are affected by their negative behavior.

#### **Ten Year Scenario Image:**

1. Find a quiet place to sit. With eyes open or closed, visualize in your mind a detailed image of the current problem or behavior you want to change. Begin by describing or noticing your present life situation (i.e., career, family, relationship, health) and the emotional states you experience about them. See your current problem in realistic detail. Begin describing your present life situation and the related emotional states.

Example: Sam, a tired 68 year old, said, "Lack of sleep. I probably have sleep apnea because I wake up so many times a night and I just can't fall asleep easily. My sleep pattern is such that I usually sleep for one hour, then wake up, than go back to sleep again, only to repeat the cycle all night. I don't think I ever get more than two hours of uninterrupted sleep a night. Yet, I don't want to handle it. I don't want to have to use a machine for the rest of my life in order to sleep. I will feel really bad if I have to wear a sleep mask because it will make me feel like an invalid. But, not sleeping makes me cranky and weak. It really worries me that my lack of sleep could be the cause of my higher weight, higher blood pressure, and also could one day

affect my heart. One of the cures of sleep apnea may be losing 30 pounds, which I am also unwilling to do; I am infuriated by having to make so many changes in my life. Weight and sleep are a connected reality."

**See year two.** Let the previous year's detail lead to this year. "I am not doing anything about weight or the sleep. I see that I worry more about high blood pressure, diabetes and my heart. I get cranky and irritable. I am weaker and more negative and depressed."

#### **See year three. What happens?**

"I am fatter because I won't be able to exercise since I am so tired and fat. I am not in good shape and very depressed. I don't care much about my family anymore and I don't feel a connection with anyone. I want to live alone. It feels very bad. I don't even care about anything anymore. I want to withdraw and be left alone because I don't feel well. Work is more of a struggle. I can't concentrate as well. I get sick more often. I will lose more clients in my work."

#### **See year four: What happens.**

"I get really sick. My resistance is really lowered and I get sick and even become disabled. I can get a heart attack and or diabetes. This feels not good."

#### **Year five: See what happens.**

"I'll probably die, I will be so sick. That is it. I can't do the rest of the years because honestly, if I don't do something about this now, I won't be around after five years. I am just so tired now that I can't even see this getting any worse."

I asked Sam what did he see about himself if he was handling his diet and sleep issues this year and to report what he saw. He said, "I see that I feel better and I am more alive and energetic and sanguine. I am more cheerful and more connected to everyone. I am more alive. I can exercise. I am connected with my family and it is enjoyable to be with them. Work is good. I am able to be there and am enjoying work and I am effective. I will get this thing handled."

For Sam it was enlightening to envision the long-term ramifications of his refusal to deal with his diet and sleep issues. The fact that he himself realized that he would not last more than five years rattled him and brought reality into the picture, which prompted him to overcome his resistance to change. Also, envisioning the positive effects if he were to handle his resistance gave him hope, enthusiasm and the impetus to change.

Source: Toni Nixon, Ed D. 1997. "New Treatment of Drug Abuse In Akhter Ahsen's book, Image Psychology." ■



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