

New Year's Resolution

*Was it a good year? Do I really need to know cause now it's behind me forever.
It was a good year because it was such a bad year that this year can only get better*

*Last year went down the drain
They all do really. Why complain?
Drink a cup of kindness yet
And say goodbye to all regrets
It's January*

Scrawl. (1998) "11:59 It's January" *Nature*

I remember a dark time in my life when this song felt like a lifeline. At the time, I was struggling with serious depression and I couldn't seem to dig my way out of the dark hole I'd fallen into. I felt hopeless and alone. Hearing the song was comforting because it made me feel like someone else understood my pain. It also gave words to the hope that life had to get better if only because it couldn't get worse.

Well beyond the clutches of that dark hole, these lyrics hint at a deeper, more powerful truth. They tell you that you have to let go of the past in order to make a clean start. The catch is that for you to do this, you need to understand how the past is embedded into the feelings and beliefs that drive your behavior.

We welcome the clean start that January offers. We make New Year's Resolutions and other promises to change. Unfortunately, we usually skip the letting go process. Instead, we focus on something superficial. By not exploring the underlying issues, we tend to end up back where we started. Most people, for example, resolve to change their eating and exercise habits in order to look or feel better. Other people focus on changing minor behaviors like chronic lateness that bosses, friends and family members find irritating. More often than not, they stick to these resolutions for a few days, weeks, or even months only to give up on them until January rolls around again.

In order to make lasting changes, you have to look into the core issues that have kept you stuck in the same old patterns year after year. There are some things you can do to help with this process. First, be gentle with yourself. You have fallen into the behavior patterns that you now want to change for a reason. Beating yourself up about them only makes things worse.

Second, you need to look beneath your patterns for the issues that drive them. Maybe you hate going to the gym because you still feel the sting of humiliation from your early gym class experiences. Maybe you're often late to work because you hate your job. But more likely, the roots of your patterns are more complicated. Maybe you've managed to get so busy that you can't find a place in your schedule to take care of yourself. It's likely that this busyness also makes it impossible to get anywhere on time. Maybe you have gotten so busy because you are afraid to be alone, feel the need to prove yourself, or are avoiding your feelings. The point is that sometimes you have to dig a little deeper to get to the root causes of your patterns.

Third, it's helpful acknowledge how your patterns serve you. If you had bad experiences in gym class, avoiding the gym now probably helps to keep those memories at bay. If you hate your job, being late probably helps give you a sense of control or power over a situation that otherwise might feel pretty crappy. Once you've acknowledged how your patterns and habits have been helping you function, you can think about what you need to do to change. Perhaps you need to get a group of friends to go to the gym with you so that you feel less vulnerable. Maybe you need to get a bowflex so that you can work out in the privacy of your own home. Or perhaps you need to seek counseling to help you work through your traumatic gym class experiences. And, maybe you should find a job you like instead of being anxious about your chronic tardiness.

Finally, it's not enough to understand why you keep falling into the same bad patterns in your life; you have to actually create new, healthier patterns. This takes commitment and persistence. As you do this, stay gentle with yourself and don't forget to ask for help if you feel that it's too hard to handle on your own.

Once you've explored your past and found ways to work through the blocks that have gotten in the way of making lasting changes, you can let go of your regrets, "drink a cup of kindness yet" and work on making changes that last. Hopefully, being gentle and compassionate with yourself will be one of the first changes that you hold on to.

This article originally appeared in Outlook Columbus in 2007.

Regina Sewell is a professional counselor licensed in Columbus, Ohio and is the author of *We're Here! We're Queer! Get Used to Us! Survival Strategies for a Hostile World*. More information can be found at www.ReginaSewell.com.