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Temporal Landmarks and New Years Resolutions

By Joan Bibelhausen, Executive Director

Every January, it's hard to find a parking space at my local Y. I celebrate the new people I will meet and try to encourage them to keep coming back. But, knowing that some will only attend briefly, I look forward to the inevitable drop-off in attendance and quicker access to equipment and lockers.

People often make New year's resolutions because of tradition – it's something everyone does. This is one example of a temporal landmark, a date or event where we decide to break from the past and move forward with new goals. We experience a fresh start effect which offers a way to envision what could be rather than what has been. These can be helpful with small goals, but for larger change, we need more. That's why nearly half of those who made a New Year's Resolution were no longer engaged by the end of January.

What can we do to increase our likelihood of success? Here are some steps.

Apply the Stages of Change. These 5 phases can help you envision a path toward a goal. Using the example of reducing stress, here's how they work:

1. Precontemplation: You are aware of a potential problem but are not yet acknowledging that change is needed (Everyone is stressed, I can't do anything about it).
2. Contemplation: You recognize and acknowledge that there is a problem but may not be sure where to begin, sure that you want change, lacking confidence that you can make a change, or somehow not ready (I would like to do something, but I don't have time and I don't know where to start).
3. Preparation/Determination: You want to do something and are open to next steps (What is the first thing I could do? Maybe Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) can help).
4. Action/Willpower: You take the first step to start doing something different with a goal of changing behavior (you've made an appointment with a counselor, or attended a CLE on stress and resilience, or joined a health club).
5. Maintenance: You keep doing something and it becomes a habit or practice. (You're still at the health club in April, you're incorporating practices suggested

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by a counselor, you've examined your biggest stressors and are addressing them systematically).

When you think of your goals, where are you in the stages of change? It's important to recognize that we may move back and forth through these phases, and that even if we start and stop, we can begin again. Joining a health club and not attending by the end of January is a breakdown between steps 4 and 5. You've already recognized the need and made progress.

Think about your reasons. What is the goal you would like to reach and what is your motivation. How do you envision your future self? What is present and what is reduced? Are you doing it for you or someone else? If it's for someone else, a counselor can help you rediscover your self-worth.

Think about your goal. Envision yourself at your goal. What happened right before that? What was the step before that one? Walk back to today and consider the reality of those steps. How do you take the first one?

What are your barriers? As you envision those steps to your goal, what is in the way? Sometimes the simplest things can hamstring us. As lawyers we solve problems, and we think we should be able to figure it all out on our own. Don't know what kind of shoes you need to start running? Find a store where someone will evaluate your needs and sell you what you need. Not sure how to find the right counselor? One call to LCL will start the process to make a good match. And you can always ask for a new referral if the connection isn't right the first time.

One Step at a Time. Look at the steps toward your goals and break them down into challenging, yet manageable pieces. Find a way to measure so you can track progress when you are feeling discouraged, and celebrate small wins. Any celebration is a source of motivation. If you didn't meet a goal, consider setting a smaller goal, then take that step. Set up accountability, whether it is telling someone, setting up a tracking document, or using a coach or counselor.

Reassess. Through your thought and action processes, you will learn about yourself and what really makes sense as you consider and make progress. Adapting to where you are now can help with those forward movements.

Ask for help. Whether it is how to do something, support through a barrier, or something larger, help is available. We may wish for less stress, but if we are dealing with anxiety or depression symptoms, or drinking or engaging in other behaviors at levels we know are unhealthy, these well-being strategies may not be enough. Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers provides free counseling to legal professionals and their families statewide on any issue that causes stress or distress. Please reach out. You are why we are here.

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