

SELF-HELP

Keeping New Year's resolutions challenging

By Helene Stoller, Psy.D

CONTRIBUTOR

It's that time again to decide which bad habits to eliminate for the new



Helene Stoller

year. As most New Year's resolutions fall by the wayside by February, what are the keys to making lifestyle changes stick? My husband, Larry, has graciously consented to allow use of

his weight loss struggle as an example for this article.

Researchers James Prochaska, Ph.D. and Carlo DiClemente, Ph.D. discuss 6 stages of change. In the Precontemplation stage, changing behavior has not yet crossed the person's mind. The person might not

even be willing to admit to a problem. Larry gained 25 pounds over six months; his clothes no longer fit, and he tired during exercise. Yet weight loss was not a consideration. The next stage is Contemplation: the person is ambivalent about change, having become aware of the unhealthiness of some behavior but not yet ready to commit to change. As we admired a photo of Larry's previously lean, sleek body and discussed donating clothing that no longer fit him, I could see him begin to contemplate losing weight. He made a plan to begin the weight loss process when we moved to Bluffton. Knowing that Larry enjoys betting but hates to lose, I helped his Preparation for change by betting that he could not reach his goal weight by the end of 2006 and maintain that weight loss for a year. The Preparation stage involves preliminary steps, planning to act within

one month.

Finally the individual commits to do the hard work of change. The Action stage involves practicing new behavior for three to six months. Larry is currently in this stage, achieving his weight loss goal by playing tennis five times a week, eating smaller portions, and allowing himself only occasional high-calorie, high-fat food rewards. Now that he has achieved his goal, the focus in 2007 will be on Maintenance to solidify these new behaviors as a permanent part of his lifestyle. The Maintenance phase allows the new behaviors to become habitual, replacing the old "bad habits." During our Thanksgiving week vacation, we ate more and exercised less. Larry had planned for the possibility of a Relapse into old behavior, and despite a four-pound gain over the week, recommitted to his diet and exercise regimen upon

our return.

Larry's example illustrates many of the processes that Prochaska and DiClemente say facilitate change: consciousness raising, self reevaluation, commitment, supportive relationships, environmental control, weighing the pros and cons of change, and reinforcing rewards.

As maintaining the status quo is far easier than change, we are more likely to change behavior when the reasons to change outweigh the benefits of remaining the same, and we get lots of reinforcement for changing. So, stack your cards heavily on the side of your desired change and go for it! What have you got to lose? In Larry's case, it was 25 extra pounds. And as an unanticipated bonus of his weight loss, he enjoys dressing up and looks great in his new wardrobe!

Helene Stoller, Psy.D., licensed clinical psychologist, Bluffton