

COUNSELOR'S CORNER

"Change takes initiative, courage, and knowledge"

By Matt Shollenberger, Ph.D.

Six months ago, a few of my friends and I gathered for a small New Years Eve party. Traditionally, we all shared our New Year's resolutions, and not surprisingly, these resolutions involved personal change. One expressed the desire to lose weight, one wanted to stop swearing, one wanted to stop smoking, one wanted to change jobs, and one wanted to learn to play a musical instrument. These are all admirable resolutions! But, it was not surprising to me that only one of my friends was achieving their goal, today, a half year later. A month after the party, I inquired as to how serious each person was about their resolution and how they planned to achieve their goal. They all expressed a strong desire to achieve, but only one had a plan and sought out professional support. The remaining friends decided to achieve their goal by just "doing it." And, as a result, these well intentioned friends are no closer to their goal than they were six months ago.

Change is difficult. There is a real comfort in familiarity, and some people choose to live a hard and difficult life rather than change their life style. Most people have initiative to change their lives, but sometimes the courage is buried deep within them, and the knowledge is found outside of them. If this is the case with you, may I suggest a plan based on the ***Change Trilogy*** which includes initiative, courage, and knowledge. Sometimes, people want a change in their life, but they don't know exactly *what* they want to change. In counseling, I like to use the miracle question; "If you could wake up tomorrow, and your life would be better, what would it look like?" By answering this question of how they want their life to be, my clients have a pretty good idea of where they need to make changes in their life. After you identify what it is you want to be different, focus on the end result (the goal) to keep your desire strong. Think about how your life will be different and better. Initiative is simply an energy; the desire to change something personal in your life. Use this energy to drive you to succeed at your goal. Don't allow this energy to die and allow yourself to dream of a better life. Many experts advise making goals "realistic" so they can be easier to achieve. This is good advice, but in the first phase of the Change Trilogy, I believe it is important to state your desires, no matter how silly or even unattainable. Goals can be refined and made more attainable throughout this Change Trilogy.

Courage is a second ingredient necessary for change. Courage is found personally within us all, but sometimes it is hidden to us and can be easier recognized by loved ones, friends, or professionals. People who know you well may remind you of times where you showed great courage in the face of danger or despair. They may remind you of times past and how far you have come through perseverance. Professionals, such as counselors or clergy, are trained and experienced in listening to your life story and pointing out times you displayed courage in your life. Sometimes people want change, but they don't tell others out of fear of embarrassment if they don't succeed at their desired goal. It is always a good idea to share your desires to a trusted individual because they may be able to help you achieve your goal, give you ideas, or help you keep your initiative and courage. Individuals tend to have a limited perspective (their own) and sharing your perspective with others may open up new and different ideas. Sometimes, just asking someone for help to find the courage within you takes courage itself! By the way, courage can be synonymous to hope.

The last step, knowledge, is the one where many people lose their initiative. They may have a burning desire to change and hope that their life can be better, but they lack the knowledge as to how to attain their goal. Many people do not get beyond the last stage because they can't find the "bridge" that will allow them to get from their current life to a better life. Once again, confiding in a professional is helpful at this stage. A professional counselor will have numerous ideas on how to get to a desired personal goal. They have multiple experiences on personal change from vastly different perspectives. An experienced counselor can "custom tailor" a step by step plan to get you from your current life to one in which you desire. Professionals are trained to help people take a dream, re-work it to be achievable, break it down into manageable steps, and pursue the achievable goal. Many times, when I tell my current clients of how former clients reached a similar goal, it appears easier to attain. Why re-invent the wheel? Learn from people that have been successful.

More tips on how to change include: *Focus on changing yourself, not others;* You cannot change other people, they have to want to change themselves. As you change your behaviors to better satisfy your self, loved ones around you may change their own behaviors as well. *Replace bad behaviors with new, positive behaviors;* For example, if you are becoming sober, you must replace all the time you spent thinking about drinking, pursuing drinking, actual drinking, and hang over time with new, powerful and positive behaviors to keep you from relapsing. *Understand that changing personal behaviors can be a process not accomplished over night;* Enjoy the journey of change. Immediate satisfaction needs may turn into immediate feelings of failure. *Reward yourself;* If the process of change is long, periodically reward yourself to help keep your motivation. If your goal is to lose

weight, reward yourself periodically with desires other than food. *Do not affiliate with negative people*; If you shared your desire with a person who puts you down or suggests that you cannot achieve your goals, don't affiliate with them.

Over two decades of clinical practice has proven to me that people can make amazing changes in their lives. Some impressive changes I have witnessed first hand were: A 35 year old woman who prostituted and abused drugs for nearly 20 years got clean, re-educated herself, and began a fulfilling a legal profession; a teenager with low self-esteem who barely graduated high school became a successful doctor; a 40 year old female enabler, divorced her alcoholic husband and began a fulfilling life on her own; a 50 year old corporate executive, tired of the rat race, quit a high paying meaningless job, and became a full time artist. These are only a few of the hundreds of amazing changes clients and friends have made and shared with me.

Matt Shollenberger, Ph.D. (484.459.6423).