**Enriching the Lives of Children by Changing Our Ineffective Scripts and Avoiding "Prescriptions for Failure": An Update**

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My May, 2008 article was devoted to one of my favorite themes, namely, the concept of personal control as a key dimension of resilience. In the book I co-authored with my friend Dr. Sam Goldstein, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life,* we note that resilient adults are those who have the insight and courage to change what they are doing if what they are doing is ineffective. Such individuals avoid blaming themselves or others if particular actions prove unproductive or counterproductive. Instead, they reflect upon the changes they can initiate to create a more positive outcome rather than wait for others to change first.

Although taking responsibility and control for one's life is an essential foundation of emotional and physical well-being, it is not easily practiced. Frequently, when faced with challenging situations, many of us become frustrated and angry. Instead of considering alternatives to our existing outlook and behaviors, we persist in doing the same thing repeatedly, trapped in a negative script, often blaming others for the state of affairs. We wait stubbornly for others to change rather than consider a different approach that we might adopt.

If our happiness is based on whether or not others modify their actions toward us, we may never be happy. As I have frequently expressed in my writings and workshops, "We are the authors of our own lives." In the role of an author, if we don't like the particular script we are following, we must ask, "What would be a more constructive script and how do I go about learning the lines of this new script?" We refrain from uttering, "Others must first alter their script before I consider changing mine."

**An Adherence to Negative Scripts**

I am often asked if most people adhere to negative scripts. Almost all of us do to a varying extent. For many of us such scripts impact only on a small part of our lives without compromising our overall sense of contentment or happiness. However, for some individuals the negative scripts are very entrenched and extensive, which explains why these individuals remain unhappy and feel unfulfilled. The following are actual

statements I have heard in my clinical and consultation activities that represent the belief that our satisfaction is predicated on what others say and do and if they do not make changes our unhappiness will continue unabated. As you will notice, proactive behaviors that we might undertake to improve the situation are absent in these comments.

A couple came to see me for marital therapy. When I asked about their marriage, the wife angrily asserted, "I would be in a good marriage if I wasn't married to him!"

A frustrated teacher offered the opinion, "I'd be a good teacher if I didn't have students like this."

The head of a company stated, "This would be a good company if people only listened to what I had to say."

A father argued, "I wouldn't have to nag if my kids did what the promised they would do. They accuse me of nagging, but they bring it on themselves."

These illustrations are a small sample of many I have heard. While it is true that all of these people would be happier if others changed, the problem is that in reality we have control over only one person in our lives, and that is ourselves. Resilient people don't blame themselves or others for the status quo, but rather they empower themselves by asking what they can do so that others might be more responsive and cooperative and/or what they can do if others are not willing to change.

Interestingly, in the past few weeks I have received feedback from three parents who heard me at different parenting presentations. All three reported similar experiences. In my presentations I advocate that instead of telling children what they must do, which often is experienced as bossing or nagging, we may obtain better results by changing the words we use. One example I offer to parents is to simply say, "I need your help," which is based on the premise (and research) that children as well as adults like to feel they are making a positive difference in the lives of others. The three parents noted, in fact, that when they altered the words they typically use, their children responded in a cooperative manner. One parent wrote that it was difficult to believe that a simple modification in her choice of words could produce such positive results. Another parent commented, "Sometimes we don't stop to think that if our children are not responding to what we are asking them to do, we should consider how we might ask them differently." A very perceptive observation!

**A Return to a School in Hawaii**

The main example of changing the script that I highlighted in my May, 2008 article involved the creative strategies implemented by Flynn Corson, the Dean of Students at the Pacific Buddhist Academy in Honolulu, and his colleagues. After Flynn heard me speak at a conference, he designed and implemented what many might judge to be an unusual program for a failing high school student. In my workshop that Flynn attended, I identified two related strategies for assisting struggling students: the first was to identify, reinforce, and display their strengths or "islands of competence" and the second was to provide these students with opportunities to help others.

Flynn applied these ideas with a student who was failing her classes and looked "sick, overwhelmed, exhausted." As I described in my earlier article but is worth highlighting again, Flynn established an "internship" for this student. "She really likes little kids and is a very talented musician (ukelele) and artist. I know this because I asked her what she liked." With the support of his colleagues Flynn made "arrangements with our elementary school so that she would spend approximately 5 hours per day in various classrooms as a TA (teaching assistant). She plans and implements them for 1st grade math, spelling, and social studies and 4th grade music; she helps with the clerical work in the room and is an aide in PE, art, and the library. She has a total of 60 students in grades pK-4th."

As this high school girl began to mentor younger children, she became increasingly comfortable accepting help in math from a senior in high school. Flynn reported that her progress in math was very significant as was her overall attitude and accomplishment. Very importantly, "she feels she's done this on her own." The belief that our achievements are based in great part on our effort and persistence underlies a resilient outlook.

**Questions Raised and Avoiding "Prescriptions for Failure"**

I have described Flynn's intervention with this student at a number of my workshops. While audience members acknowledge that this particular student became noticeably more motivated to learn and achieve in school, several raised the question if creating such a modified program in which a student spends so much time as a TA really meets her educational needs. Others have wondered how flexible can a school be if a

number of students require such modification to succeed, especially in light of preparing them for high stakes testing.

These are important questions without a simple answer. However, in working with hundreds of at-risk students during my career, I have been impressed with how even small modifications in a youngster's program have led to major improvement in their achievement and behavior in school. I vividly remember one faculty member offering what I considered to be a very perceptive remark about an adolescent struggling in school. She said that his current academic program represented "a prescription for failure." I think that most would agree that "a prescription for failure" demands the introduction of a new prescription. I recognize that some schools and faculty may have greater flexibility and freedom to make significant changes in their programs compared with other schools, especially in responding to students who are struggling or failing. However, even for those schools in which flexibility is a scarce commodity, initiating small, realistic changes with several students may serve as the catalyst for the emergence of more comprehensive changes.

I believe it is actually more time-consuming and costly to persist in requiring students to accommodate to educational programs that one can predict in advance will eventuate in failure. When students view the school environment as "the place where my deficits rather than my strengths are highlighted" (a vivid description offered by one of my patients), they are less likely to be motivated to meet academic demands and more likely to engage in disruptive or avoidant behaviors. Such students are inclined to drop out, if not physically, then emotionally. As one high school student observed before he dropped out of school, "I stand in the shower saying, 'Maybe it will be a good day,' but deep inside I know it will be the same." Once feelings of hopelessness and despair set in, there is little likelihood that success will follow.

I was reminded of my article from last May because I recently received an e-mail from Flynn in which he updated the progress of the student about whom he had originally written. He also described his thought-provoking interventions with another high school student that I may reserve for discussion in a future article. I want to share in full Flynn's words about the first student since they provide a powerful illustration of what can transpire when educators display the thoughtfulness and courage to replace an existing

educational approach that is ineffective with one that although not found in a traditional textbook offers great promise.

Flynn writes, "I wanted to send you an update regarding the progress of a student who reaped the benefits of an academic intervention inspired by a lecture you gave last spring in Honolulu. I hope you remember our school, the Pacific Buddhist Academy, and the student who is now a 10th grader. In the first semester this year she earned a 3.35 GPA and her teachers report a dramatic '180 degree' academic turn around. Her confidence is higher, she is more socially successful, and she clearly feels much better about school and learning. Her psychologist e-mailed me today and suggested that we begin to move towards terminating their regular appointments as she feels she is ready to move forward with greater independence. For some reason the word 'ready' really stands out in this e-mail. Thank you for helping us 'ready' her, Bob."

I appreciate that Flynn gave me some credit for this student's success, but the full credit should be directed to Flynn and his colleagues for their willingness to enter unchartered waters in implementing a program that I believe rescued this student's self-esteem, motivation, ability to learn, and her sense of hope. I am convinced that if they had not displayed the fortitude to venture in these unchartered waters, this student would have gone down a very different path, one characterized by a lack of success, failure in school, and, very importantly, a loss of dignity that might burden her for years, if not her entire lifetime.

If we are to alter negative scripts and avoid an adherence to prescriptions for failure we must first recognize their existence. Once this recognition occurs, we can begin to take small steps to replace counterproductive behaviors with more adaptive approaches to different challenges that we face. Such a move will benefit not only ourselves but also the many people with whom we interact in our personal and professional lives.