

## Negative Scripts, Resolutions, and the Obstacles to Change

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It was the third week of January several years ago. I had just finished a presentation about steps to initiate a healthier, more resilient lifestyle. The main points I addressed were those my colleague Sam Goldstein and I emphasized in our book [\*The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life\*](#).

I highlighted the power of “negative scripts” that represent obstacles to achieving desired changes in our lives. As the words “negative scripts” suggest, these represent thoughts and behaviors to which we rigidly adhere, even when these scripts prove to be counterproductive or self-defeating. When negative scripts involve other people, we are likely to believe that it’s the responsibility of others to change first, not us. In these scenarios, it’s as if we are actors in a play, unable to deviate from what we say and do.

There are many everyday examples of negative scripts, including the following:

I saw Paul in therapy. He was having difficulty in his managerial role. He asserted, “My staff knows what’s expected of them and if they don’t do it, they will hear from me.” When I asked Paul if they hear from him when they do perform well, he seemed surprised, responding, “There’s no need to say anything, they did what was expected of them.”

A teacher perceived Jon, a fifth-grade student, as “lazy” and “unmotivated.” On a regular basis he told Jon, “You’re never going to succeed unless you try harder to do the work.” In fact, Jon had significant learning problems and if there were an assessment tool to measure “effort,” his score initially would have been very high. Sadly, given this teacher’s lack of support and empathy, whatever optimism Jon possessed was soon replaced by feelings of helplessness. This situation contributed to the reinforcement of Jon’s own negative script. Believing there was nothing he could do to succeed in the classroom, he basically stopped doing his work. The teacher viewed this behavior as a confirmation that Jon wasn’t trying hard enough, failing to recognize that Jon’s negative script was constantly being reinforced by his actions as a teacher.

Her parents constantly reminded Mia, their 13-year-old daughter, to clean her room to little avail. Mia had developed her own script by yelling at her parents, “You always nag me. Why don’t you just stop nagging me!” Mia’s parents predictably voiced their script by angrily saying, “We wouldn’t have to nag you if you just did what we asked you to do!”

Before continuing, it's important to note what may seem obvious—not all scripts are negative. A teacher who greets students with welcoming words each morning, a supervisor who finds regular opportunities to acknowledge the efforts of their staff, a person who maintains a daily exercise routine, or a family who has discovered the benefits of having dinner together are all displaying what might be labeled as “positive scripts.” These scripts enrich our relationships and nurture our physical and emotional well-being. However, I often joke that if a teenager's first comment each morning is, “I am so fortunate to be growing up in this household,” you might want to be a little suspicious!

### **Negative Scripts and New Year's Resolutions**

Returning to the presentation I alluded to at the beginning of this article, since it was held three weeks after the beginning of the new year, my comments about negative scripts evoked questions about New Year's resolutions. One man said that my description of negative scripts elicited thoughts about one of his resolutions, to exercise more consistently. He had purchased a treadmill and set a goal of using it for 30 minutes five times a week. He told the audience that he achieved his goal during the first week but began to “slip” in the second week, using it on only three days. He added that my description of “negative scripts” quickly reminded him of his thoughts when he didn't meet his goal by the second week. “I was angry because this wasn't the first time I haven't stuck with things, especially when it comes to exercise and taking care of myself. I became depressed and wondered why I spent money on a treadmill.”

This man's openness appeared to encourage others to share their experiences. A woman told a story about her diet. She recounted that her goal of avoiding high-calorie desserts lasted for about 10 days before she was tempted to take just “a spoonful of ice cream,” which led to consuming an increasing number of spoonfuls. She then concluded that she thought she was born with limited willpower and would never be capable of losing weight.

These comments led to a lively discussion with the audience. Someone asked my thoughts about the effectiveness of New Year's resolutions. I first replied that the task of creating goals as well as actions to meet these goals is an important feature of leading a resilient life. I observed that while the beginning of a new year seemed a natural time to engage in this task, there was no reason that a time for self-improvement had to be confined to the start of a new year. We then spoke of reasons for abandoning resolutions, such as setting unrealistic goals, not

using effective strategies, being unprepared for setbacks, and not appreciating the challenges of overcoming negative scripts.

### **The Challenges of Fulfilling New Year's Resolutions**

Articles about New Year's resolutions abound at this time of year. Not surprisingly, research has been conducted examining how many people stick with their resolutions. [A study of 1,000 adults undertaken by Forbes Health](#) reported by Sarah Davis found that nearly 48% of respondents stated that improving physical fitness was their top priority, with 36% listing mental health as their first priority. When asked what is more important to them, 55% said improving physical and mental health was equally important. The survey also found that other prominent New Year's resolutions dealt with finances (38%), weight loss (34%), and diet (32%).

Davis examined the question of how long do people typically keep up with their New Year's resolutions. She found, "Failing at New Year's resolutions is so common that there's even a slew of (unofficial) dates commemorating such failures—some sources cite 'Ditch New Year's Resolution Day' as January 17, while others denote the second Friday in January as 'Quitter's Day.'"

Davis continued, "The types of goals you set also matter when it comes to success. Research in *PLoS One* suggests action-oriented goals are more likely to result in success than avoidance-oriented goals (59% versus 47%)."

In an article posted in the [Forbes Women newsletter](#), contributor Jane Hanson explained that Quitter's Day came from "fitness app data, which showed a sharp drop in activity by mid-January. Trips to the gym dwindle (people tell me they can once again get a spot in the parking lot!), diets falter, and new habits fade. The timing makes sense: The initial burst of motivation wears off, the hard work of forming sustainable habits sets in. Without immediate results, frustration and discouragement creep up, prompting people to quit."

I would add that on Quitter's Day, the negative scripts continue to dominate our lives.

### **Strategies for Sticking with Resolutions**

Hanson offered some sound advice to stick with resolutions (and overcome negative scripts). These include:

***Start Small and Be Specific.*** This sounds like such a basic, straightforward strategy, but in our desire to experience a notable change in our lives, we fall prey to passing over short-term goals while focusing exclusively on long-term goals. A man I saw in therapy who had never

jogged before informed me that his goal was to jog five miles. I assumed the five miles was his long-term goal, but he saw it as his short-term goal. This led to a lengthy discussion of establishing a very specific and realistic short-term goal. He began by jogging around his block, which took much more effort than he had anticipated. As he discovered, by starting with this more reasonable goal, one small success led to another, motivating him to continue towards his long-term goal. Hanson also emphasized that “lofty, vague goals like ‘get healthier’ or ‘be more productive’ are hard to achieve.”

***Plan for Obstacles.*** I have often written about this factor. In my clinical and consultation activities I found it very helpful to ask my patients/clients to consider the obstacles they are likely to face in reaching particular goals. To ensure that my request that they reflect on obstacles would not lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure, I then asked them how they might handle these obstacles or setbacks should they arise. Identifying both obstacles and strategies to manage them reinforces a sense of personal control, helps to change negative scripts, and permits an individual to be successful in meeting goals. In her book *Rethinking Positive Thinking*, psychologist Gabriele Oettingen described this technique as “mental contrasting.”

***Find a Support System.*** I have heard many examples of the benefits of walking/jogging with a friend, maintaining a diet with a spouse, or attending a parenting group with another parent. The encouragement that arises from even one person can make the difference between continuing to meet goals or giving up before they are reached.

***Track Your Progress.*** I have worked with many children and adolescents who struggle in school. Sometimes, the gains in their learning are not readily apparent. However, it is not unusual to see improvement when comparing what a student could do months before with what they can do now. Hanson recommended keeping a journal or using an app (the use of apps has become very popular) to measure progress.

***Show Yourself Grace.*** While giving webinars to different groups during the first 18 months of the pandemic, I frequently spoke of the importance of self-compassion, citing the impressive work of psychologist Kristin Neff at the University of Texas at Austin. My focus on self-compassion was prompted by the number of people who felt that they were not coping adequately with responsibilities in both their personal and/or professional lives. In response, I emphasized that the disruptive ramifications of the pandemic were new to all of us, adding that just as we would be compassionate towards a friend or family member who was struggling, we

must strive to be kind to ourselves. I acknowledged that developing self-compassion could feel like a Herculean task. Hanson eloquently described “showing yourself grace” when she wrote:

We are harder on ourselves than we are on anyone else in our lives. Resolutions often fail due to an all-or-nothing mindset full of tough self-criticism. Missing one workout or eating a brownie sundae doesn't mean you've failed. Treat yourself with the kindness you'd show a friend, and remember that consistency, not perfection, is the key to long-term success.

Hanson finished her thoughtful article by observing that Quitter's Day does not have to be the day we give up on our resolutions. Instead, she advised that this day serve as a “checkpoint and reset” and that we reflect on what we're “doing right and what isn't working. Make the changes you need and turn the symbolic day of defeat into a celebration of progress.”

One final thought. I recommend that you identify one change you would like to make in your life. Consider the small, short-term steps you can initiate that will lead to reaching long-term goals. During this process, prepare for possible obstacles and setbacks. And don't forget to celebrate as you move closer to achieving your desired results.

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