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Beginnings

By: James L. Holly, MD

As we discussed last week, both psychologically and physiologically, human beings are sensitive to time and particularly to changes in time. Whether that time is measured by the rising and setting of the sun, or with atomic clocks which subdivide seconds into nanoseconds, the periodicity of biological functions affects all of us.

Psychologically, one of the most dynamic aspects of time has to do with beginnings. The imperfection of mankind both in the conception of and in the execution of a plan makes the opportunity for starting over, indeed of a new beginning, a particularly important aspect of personal success and even of our progress as a people.

It is this redemptive aspect of time with its presentation of opportunities for new beginnings which has us often focus on the New Year. This redemptive aspect of time allows us to be disencumbered, at least mentally, by past choices and failures, and allows us to hope for and anticipate better things in the future.

But, why is January 1, the beginning of a new year? The name of the month of January is a translation of the Latin *Januarius*, named after *Janus*, the Roman god of beginnings. In ancient times, the Roman calendar began in March, not January. On that calendar, the first day of each month was called *kaledae* or *calends*. Debts were due on this day of each month, so books to track payments were called *calendarium* from which we get our modern word *calendar*.

The year is the time needed by the Earth for one full orbit around the Sun. At the end of that time, the Earth is back to the same point in its orbit, and the Sun is therefore back to the same apparent position in the sky. This defines the year. The duration of the Moon's cycle -- synodic period -- gave rise to the division of time known as month. The history of calendars, clocks and the concept of time is much richer and more complex than this, but this brief introduction allows us to discuss beginnings and how they may relate to our health, physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally.

Intrinsic to the concept of new beginnings is the parallel concept of starting over. And, while the calendar and the clock relentlessly move forward, waiting for nothing and no one it seems, the periodicity of both, the cycle of both, allows us the opportunity to get a fresh start, no matter what our prior experience, or present position may be.

It is here that several concepts are helpful in thinking about the New Year with its opportunities, challenges and even with its invitation for change. Several of these concepts are so simplistic, even like the concept of a new year, that they may have escaped our attention.

Starting: the first requirement for finishing

While there are many things which we have started and have not finished, we have never finished anything which we did not start. Now before you say, "That's silly," think about it. As humans, we often so focus on the goal, the product, the endpoint that we forget that every journey, no matter how long, begins with a single step. To succeed, to achieve our end-point in any initiative, the process must be more in our mind than the product. In health, the process of getting healthy has to become the daily focus of our attention rather than the goal. Here grammar is important. The use of the continuing tense of the verb "to get" is appropriate. The process of getting is the focus with its sense of an on-going process. The time required to reach a goal is often too far off for the goal to successfully retain our attention. Second, the only thing we can do about our health is what we do today. Therefore, if we succeed today, and we succeed tomorrow, and if we succeed the next day, if we continue to focus on daily success, without regard to an endpoint, we will inevitably succeed.

The greatest opportunity for impacting one's health is presented by the calendar and the clock. Concepts such as the new year, today, this morning, etc., all present beginning points at which we may make a decision about changing our health. This is illustrated by a group of ladies whom I observed in a water aerobics class. In October, 2002, this column was entitled, "Exercise for Life, Something is better than nothing." (The full text of that article can be found at www.jameslhollymd.com) That article stated:

"It is my habit to walk five miles five days a week. Saturday morning as I walked, I noticed a group of ladies in a water-aerobics class. They were older and overweight. As I continued my walk, I realized that exercise for health is not a competitive sport. In order to benefit -- indeed, in order to win -- you don't have to beat someone else, or be better than someone else; you simply have to improve your own performance gradually and continue the process over a long time. This is not unlike Mikhail Baryshnikov's declaration, 'I do not try to dance better than anyone else. I only try to dance better than myself.'

As I continued to walk and to think about these ladies, I realized how smart they are. They want to live well, while they live, and they are doing something about it. That's smart! They don't have to do a great deal; they don't have to be competitors with others, they simply have to take responsibility for their own well being and determine to start and to continue exercise for the rest of their lives."

Toward the end of the year cycle, in October, these ladies had chosen to begin. The focus should not be on whether they will lose weight, or whether they will continue, but on the fact and on the wisdom of their having begun.

Starting and starting over is the process of success

Implicit in the first concept about beginnings is another that is equally simplistic: It is better to fail a thousand times than to succeed once doing nothing. While the calendar and the clock relentlessly move forward, they both also provide us with the opportunity to start over. No matter how often we have started and stopped; no matter how often we have failed,

however, we may measure or judge failure, we can begin again.

In reality, with any initiative for our health, success is always marked by starting and stopping. The difference between those who achieve their goals, or who at least move toward their goal and those who do not, is the time between the judgment of having failed and the determination or resolution to begin again. If the failure is indiscretion at a meal with overeating, it is possible to acknowledge that failure and to begin again at the next meal. Weight gain is not measured in months but in meals. Success in moving toward a goal in weight reduction is not measured in pounds but in decisions about the next meal, snack, or exercise opportunity.

Inertia: An element of success or failure in health initiatives

It is a psychological fact that success and failure in health initiatives have inertia of their own. This simply means that success tends to breed success and failure tends to give birth to failure. But, rather than being defeated by this reality, it is possible to turn it to one's good. Building on prior success in the case of a positive result, or being released from the pessimism resulting from prior failures are both mechanisms in the process of change which lasts.

Get Going

How can we capture the potential of a new year in order to improve our health? First, recognize that it is not as important as to where you are, as to where you are going. And, for your health, it is not the destination which is as important as the journey. It is the continuing tense of the verb "to go" which is important.

Sometimes, we are not inclined to start because we think the journey is too long, but when we re-direct our focus from the destination and focus on the first step, we realize that we are capable of taking that step and then another and then another.

Success is founded upon not focusing upon success; success is founded upon focusing on getting started. And, if in one year, you discover that you have failed and restarted a thousand times, you will have restarted three times a day, which means that you will have made more progress than someone who never started.

Get Going for yourself

Second, don't focus on others. Comparing yourself with others will only defeat you, as for all of us; there is someone, somewhere who is faster, leaner, smarter, etc., than we are. Your bench mark is not someone else; it is you. If you can run safely do so. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, swim. If you can't swim, pedal. If you can't pedal, row. The reality is that exercise is critical to any improvement in anyone's health, no matter what the goal. And, there are extremely few people who can do no form of exercise. So, get started.

Get going with something you can do

Third, start something which you have a high degree of probability of sustaining. Make sure

the equipment needed is readily available. Make sure the time required fits your schedule. Make sure that the energy expenditure is possible within your age and condition.

Get going with others

Four, your probability of success will increase if you become accountable for your program. That may mean having a personal trainer with whom you meet. That may mean having a friend with whom you exercise. That may simply mean having someone to whom you report your progress. Whatever it means, remember you, like all people, operate best when others are encouraging you and when you are reporting to others.

Start Over, but start over quickly

Five, if you fail, admit it and start over. Here, it is possible to gain perspective from President Theodore Roosevelt, who said:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually try to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

Spoken in a different context, Roosevelt’s words challenge, yet comfort, all of us who have started, stopped, started, failed, started over and in the long-run, kept going.

The New Year is a great time to start, or to start over. In the words of the athletic shoe manufacturer, “just do it.” Remember, it is your life and it is your health, which makes getting started your responsibility.