



TISHREI 5774

The Challenge of Change: Moving Forward in a Spiral

How often is the temptation of dessert or just one more cigarette the end of a personal quest for healthy behavior? The need to overcome these recurrent, and unavoidable, setbacks is part of the transformation process. Learning to deal with the challenges and start again anew is a requirement of staying on the spiral of success. Two steps forward, and one.....

The High Holidays provide a special time for Jews to look inward and evaluate the aspects of their personal lives that are working, as well as those that are not doing so well. The concept of *Teshuvah* is usually translated as “repentance” but it also means “turning.” Of course, this concept often refers to a return toward a more ethical, and possibly more observant, life style. The same focus, or reevaluation, applies to one’s health status and behavioral patterns. What better time than all the hours in synagogue to think and plan about meeting these recurrent challenges to one’s health?

The idea of new year’s resolutions for Rosh Hashanah is not a Jewish tradition, but applying the idea of return - to one’s fitness plan, weight program, stress management, or other behaviors - is certainly reasonable. Understanding why behavioral change involves setbacks and how to overcome them are all part of this process. The idea is not to start all over, but to use them as stepping stones for more permanent change.

The research on behavioral change is extensive. One of the most accepted models is the Transtheoretical Model of Health Behavior Change developed by James O. Prochaska and others. This includes a five step model for change:

1. Precontemplation
2. Contemplation
3. Preparation
4. Action
5. Maintenance

Each step requires making decisions: What do I know about my risks? What can I do to change? Is the balance between the negative and the positive enough to push my decision-making?

In terms of weight loss, fitness maintenance, smoking cessation, and stress management, most people are beyond the precontemplation phase. They are either stuck at contemplation of what to

do or ready to do something, but don't know what to do. Once action happens the process of change has its own vitality; success, and the feeling of doing something, carries its own rewards.

So why is maintenance so difficult? The list is long. Most people's greatest strengths can also be their weakness. For example, an individual who is enthusiastic about exercise might also be involved in so many other things that there is simply no time to stay fit.

The strategies to overcome setbacks are also numerous, and usually involve these remedies:

1. Recognize that setbacks are part of the process; they are normal.
2. Reevaluate strategies for change.
3. Seek help from others.

The first one is an important part of the Teshuvah process overall. Accepting one's fallibility and forgiving oneself are essential to being able to do the same with others. Move on and accept that this problem will occur again. The reevaluation requires both internal and external factors. What is stopping you? What in your environment or daily schedule needs to be altered to support your efforts? The same set of skills is essential whether the goal is weight loss, smoking cessation, improved social relationships, or studying a new subject.

Finally, recognizing the advantage of sharing the task and goals with others is vital. Family members can support your efforts; exercise buddies can assure your conscientiousness, and groups are good to establish continuity. Professionals are always available to answer questions and offer new ways to approach changing life-long habits.

At this time of year, spending a few minutes to sort out which behavioral habits are positive and which ones require some work is useful. Accepting the reality that each new year brings an opportunity to work on improving oneself and that change is best approached in a circular way – moving forward in a spiral with setbacks and slightly new directions to assure success.

Shana tovah.