

WHY NEW YEARS RESOLUTIONS DON'T WORK-PODCAST #21 – ROUGH DRAFT

Today I want to talk about the power of the unconscious mind. And even though it's not that time of year, I'll introduce the subject by talking about why New Years resolutions don't work. Oh, I suppose that there are some people who are able to use the occasion to alter something in their lives. But, generally, they -- we -- don't change simply because we resolve to do so. If change were simply a matter of conscious choice, this wouldn't be true. But it is. In fact, if people really came to terms with the fact that change isn't primarily the result of conscious intentions, they would have to radically change how they view themselves and others.

The reason that New Year's resolutions don't work is that we have unconscious resolutions not to change. For every conscious resolution to lose weight, stop drinking, save money, call your Mom more often, control your temper, or finish that project, there are unconscious commitments to keep things exactly the way they are. But if we accept that, then we would have to accept the pervasive power of the unconscious mind in our everyday lives, in both health and illness. This is a perspective that unfortunately runs counter to prevailing cultural norms that have rejected psychoanalytic ideas, idealized biology, and hold on to destructive American ideals of personal and moral responsibility.

Here's the real story behind the well-documented failure of New Year's resolutions: We don't develop self-destructive behaviors because we're weak, or because "they just became a habit," or because everyone

around us was doing them, or because of our neurobiology or heredity. The meaning of these behaviors is unconscious and we develop them because they serve unconscious beliefs and needs. And these beliefs and needs are important building blocks of our identities. They provide a sense of safety, and changing them is unconsciously experienced as dangerous.

For example, my patient, Sheila, was a binge eater who gained and lost hundreds upon hundreds of pounds, went on (and failed at) dozens of diets, made untold resolutions on New Year's day that were abandoned a month later. Growing up, Sheila felt lonely and disconnected. Eating gave her momentary relief from feelings that were too painful to tolerate for very long. Giving up bingeing meant facing these painful states and she believed that the consequences of doing so would be emotionally catastrophic. This entire sequence of lonely = bingeing = momentary relief, as well her belief that she couldn't tolerate becoming too mindful of her eating was outside her conscious awareness most of the time, an awareness that, instead, relentlessly drove her to one unsuccessful diet after another. There isn't a psychotherapist alive who hasn't seen this pattern.

My patient, Bob, was a procrastinator who couldn't seem to write the thesis necessary for him to graduate college. He made repeated vows to get more organized and focused but couldn't seem to do it. He tried treating his problem with stimulants, hypnosis, and behavioral conditioning to no avail. He thought of himself as a "lazy fuck-up" and saw no reason why he couldn't just use his willpower to resolve to change. But it turned out that it wasn't a matter of will power. There were reasons, but these reasons were unconscious. At a level quite outside his awareness, Bob was afraid that if

he gave up the procrastinator role--however painful this role was for him—but a role that he knew, the resulting success and independence—which he'd SAY he wanted more than anything—would feel unfamiliar and—here's the key, it would feel frightening. But see how the unconscious mind works. If you told Bob that he was scared of success, he's say that you were crazy. But that would be Bob's rational, conscious mind speaking.

But from the point of view of Bob's unconscious mind, it was quite understandable. Bob had grown up experiencing his parents as frustrated and disappointed in their own lives. Bob developed the unconscious belief that if he were successful and independent, he would hurt them and leave them behind. And I'm here to tell you that this belief, this unconscious belief, is not so rare. Children develop these beliefs by making inferences about their environments. But these inferences just seem normal, like they're the way reality is and the way it's supposed to be. Such inferences live on in the backgrounds of our minds. They become unconscious. Bob was afraid, then, on an unconscious level, of fulfilling his New Years resolution.

The examples are endless because the vicissitudes of the unconscious mind are endless. And, yet, most of us can't accept that we even have an unconscious mind, much less that it plays such a profound role in thwarting our highest aims. Perhaps, as Freud said, it's a blow to our narcissism. Perhaps it undermines our sense of moral agency and responsibility. You know, you're supposed to take responsibility for your own suffering, and not blame your parent, not BLAME something that's outside your conscious control or awareness. Perhaps we're afraid that if we do believe in it,

explore and try to understand it, that our worst fears about ourselves will be confirmed.

Whatever the reasons, we live in a culture that increasingly regards the irrefutable presence of unconscious conflict as if it were a laugh-line from a Woody Allen movie. Neurobiology is king. At best, we *meditate* and at worst we *medicate*.

I can't tell you how many times I've been in conversations with people who believe that they have a conscious choice over everything in their lives, that if they just had the will power, they could change any and all of the conditions in their lives that were screwing up their lives. They don't have such freedom, unfortunately. Because what's holding them back is not conscious and not available to them to change.

Look--the alternative does not have to be 10 years of psychoanalysis. But it does have to start with a compassionate curiosity to the real forces that motivate our behavior and, more important, forces that inhibit and resist our development.

We do things that are harmful to ourselves and others because it is safer to do so than to face the unknown, the unknown that is threatening to us for reasons that are unconscious. By denying the unconscious, we are truly losing our minds.