

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **Penance vs. The Drinking Song**

One year, I worked in a laundry where the same radio station was always playing. By far the most played song, which, at the time, I grew to loathe, was “Tubthumping,” a drinking song that went something like: *I GET KNOCKED DOWN. But I get UP again. You’re NEV-er gonna keep me down.* (Repeat 80 times or so). I’m not really sure whether alcohol or brawling kept knocking the guy down, but I’m pretty sure that whatever it was, he got up again, and again.

Since it is New Years Eve, a rather popular drinking occasion, and since tomorrow begins New Year’s resolution month, I think we should take this moment to consider the wisdom hidden within this outstanding work of art, particularly pertaining to resolutions for change.

#### **The Cycle of Resolution Failure**

To engage in this lofty pursuit, however, we’ll first have to be honest about how our resolutions for change often go:

**Step 1:** After noticing the increasingly nasty effects of the behavior we want to change, we decide that changing is worth the effort. We summon great **will power** and resolve and maybe some **rules to follow** in various times of day or situations to increase the likelihood that the change will happen. This works for a few hours, a week, a month, or until ...

**Step 2:** We encounter an **unexpected event** that temporarily trumps our rules and intentions. Aunt Shirley brings over her world famous cheesecake in the middle of our “no dessert day.” We have the worst day of work in history and can’t imagine making it through without alcohol to take the edge off. The kid throws up right as we’re heading out the door to the gym so we miss our workout. You know the deal. Then...

**Step 3a: We feel guilty** that we did not meet our change goal because of the unexpected event and so **we try extra hard** for the next few days to make up for our lapse. We start to feel deprived, like we can’t have *anything* good. Our desire to return to the time before we had to try extra hard—to go back to our old habits—increases because we don’t feel our needs are being met under these new conditions. Or...

**Step 3b: We mess up harder**, saying, “Since I already slipped, I might as well go all the way and *really* mess up. I already ate a piece of cheesecake. Why not the whole thing? I already failed with one beer, why not drink till I *really* feel better. I missed the gym yesterday, why not today, too? I’ll have to start all over anyway. Why not do it later?” So...

**Step 4:** Because of either of these lines of thinking, we tend to **abandon our change effort**. After all, haven’t we proven that it’s just too hard to sustain with our wimpy will power? This lasts until the effects bug us enough again that we forget we are a failure and return to Step 1.

To break this cycle, we can't jump in at Step 2. There are just too many things that contribute to that one—no way to block them all. Nope, Step 3 is where it's at. And if you look closer, you'll find that Step 3 is all about punishment, or penance, if you will.

## **Self Protection: The Function of Penance**

You know penance, right? That Catholic/Orthodox practice where you go to confession, say the bad things you've done, and then the Father gives you a certain number of prayers or tasks you must do before you can let go of the guilt and be okay again? That's penance. And I don't care what religious tradition characterized your upbringing. We all at some gut level understand the concept. As a kid, you break your mom's best vase. You have to pay your allowance to get a new one or do extra chores and only then will she stop leering at you. In school, you pull little Suzie's hair so you've got to do 30 minutes of detention before you are cleared to do recess again. At work, your sales fall below the target for the month so you are on probation until you double your sales. Only then will they stop threatening to fire you. At a gut level, it makes sense to us that if we mess up, at least if we get caught, we have to do something before "reset" gets pressed and we are in the clear again.

When we don't have a boss or parent who is overseeing our personal change goals, though, then who is responsible for doling out the penance when we mess up? I mean, someone's gotta do it, right? There's no such thing as a "get out of jail free" card, *right?* Often, we're uncomfortable letting ourselves off the hook without some kind of penance. We're unconsciously (and occasionally consciously) afraid that if we don't punish ourselves for our failures, some all knowing authority—God, karma, Santa, the universe, or whoever—will take notice and step in to punish us to keep everything right in the world.

Since we'd much rather be responsible for our punishment than let someone else do it, we step in and make our own penance to protect ourselves from worse punishment. We work ourselves so hard to make up for it (painful!) that we can't actually sustain that level of activity, so eventually we crumble for lack of self care. Or we unconsciously push ourselves to fail in a bigger, more self-damaging way, knowing that the combination of self harm and self loathing will put us into a dark place that "counts" as penance for the initial slip we had.

## **This Year's Resolution: Sing the Drinking Song**

Now let's return to our favorite drinking song to compare. Notice what the Drinker does after Step 2 "knocks him down." He just gets up again and returns to his goal, in this case, drinking. The knock down *is* the reset button for him. There's no intermediate step of pausing to consider, feeling like a failure because he fell, or fearing punishment. The moment he slips and falls, he just gets up again and returns to the same goal. He doesn't do more of it or less of it because of the fall. He just does it again. There's no penance with this guy.

I'm not recommending perpetual inebriation, of course. But I think this ridiculous song holds the secret of stopping the failure cycle at Step 3. When we fall down, we need to let the start of the very next moment be the time to return to the goal, the time to "get up again." Not in an intensified form to make up for our slip, but exactly the same as if nothing had happened.

How? Like this. You eat the slice of cheesecake (Step 2). You want to eat the whole thing in a now more conscious attempt to punish yourself for eating a dessert on "no dessert day," plus it tastes good and makes you feel better after all your self denial (Step 3). But you remind yourself

that you've decided that one slip means *nothing* about your overall goal. So in that moment you decide that it's time to resume "no dessert day," even though the rule was broken earlier, so you don't go ahead and eat the whole thing (Revised Step 3). Then, you start noticing yourself feeling bad that you slipped, even if you did well by immediately returning to your goal. You feel like you should cut down on your meal calories the next day to make up for it (Step 3 again). But you remind yourself that overshooting your goal through making tomorrow even harder will only make you feel deprived, which will make you want to eat even more the day after. You remember that you don't have to make up for your slip, you just need to return to the plan as usual from this moment on (Revised Step 3). And in your head, you start chanting, "*I get knocked down...*"

Okay, so what about our inbred need to self punish? Yep. *That* is a tough habit to break. Like any change it requires:

- 1) Noticing when you are attempting to do it,
- 2) Realizing that there is no benefit to be gained for yourself, others, or God through either crazy overwork or self harm. Those aren't valid, righteous, helpful penances ever! They just set you up to fail.
- 3) Choosing to remember that realization and choosing to believe it in that moment, and
- 4) Returning immediately to your goal of stopping self punishment whenever you find yourself doing it, chanting...by now you know what!

So this year, I invite you to make this drinking song your resolution *for your resolutions*. Get knocked down. Just get up again. No ifs, ands, or buts. Oh, and don't follow that guy's advice about drinking, especially tonight ;)

Happy New Year to you all!

If you or someone you know would like help with changing behaviors or self punishment, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com)*.

Thanks for reading!

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