



The Key to Keeping that New Year's Resolution

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The New Year has arrived in full force. As our patients resolve that this year will be different than last year, it is our role as healthcare providers to assist patients in improving their health. Although it is easy to understand the value of lifestyle modification, a lasting behavior change can be quite difficult for patients to accomplish. Common barriers to successful change include both physician and patient factors. Patients are often in denial, may be hindered by past failures, or do not have the skills and knowledge to reach their goals. Physicians can compound the problem by labeling their patients as non-compliant, by criticizing their patients, or by not addressing behavior change due to a lack of time or frustration.

To effectively assist our patients with behavior change, healthcare providers must first identify where a patient is on the Stages of Change model. The model has five stages:

- Pre-contemplation - Patient not considering a change
- Contemplation - Pros and Cons assessed, benefits and costs weighed.
- Preparation - Knowledge and skills assembled to create successful plan for change.
- Action - Plan is implemented.
- Maintenance - Evaluation of results and plan modification as needed to achieve desired goal.

The goal of the healthcare provider at any visit is to move the patient along the stages of change continuum. Patient resistance is evidence that the physician has moved too far ahead of the patient in the change process. Returning to empathy and thought-provoking questions will aid the patient in moving forward. This process can be challenging and the physician must be prepared for resistance. Otherwise, the physician will become frustrated and will cease from assisting the patient. Often the patient may stay in the contemplation stage for years before moving forward. It is imperative that the physician persists by employing motivational interviewing techniques such as encouragement, validation, praise, and reflective listening. Motivational interviewing is beyond the scope of this article, but more information can be found by reviewing the work of W.R. Miller and S. Rollnick.

Effective goal setting is vital. Goals should be specific, attainable, and forgiving. Selecting a series of short-term goals that direct a patient closer to the ultimate goal is essential. Rewards for short-term goals help to encourage the patient and should be timely, desirable, and contingent on meeting a goal. Self-monitoring by observing and recording behavior will aid the patient in assessing progress and will stimulate the patient to re-direct efforts if needed. Creating a social network or environmental setting that supports the patient moving forward is crucial for long-term success.

Sir William Osler once said, “The good physician treats the disease, the great physician treats the patient who has the disease.” My resolution this year is to spend more time on the latter.