



e-quilibrium

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Try Again

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." This well-known proverb is generally attributed to Thomas Palmer, author of the Teacher's Manual (1840). The saying was used to encourage school children to do their homework. Does the strategy work with health behavior change, especially when repeated attempts to attain a goal are unsuccessful?

The area of health behavior is certainly a place where people frequently "try, try again." For example, unsuccessful attempts to lose weight often do not deter an individual from subsequent attempts to lose weight. University of Toronto psychologists Janet Polivy and Peter Herman describe a pattern that they label the "false hope syndrome." The syndrome begins with taking on a difficult (perhaps unrealistic) task. Some initial progress subsequently gives way to failure to meet the goal. The outcome is interpreted in such a way that failure is not viewed as inevitable. Memories of the initial progress fuel a subsequent attempt at the same difficult goal.

The "false hope syndrome" is quite controversial, as you might imagine. A number of individuals are successful in reaching difficult health behavior change goals, and some health behavior changes typically require repeated attempts before success is attained (e.g., smoking cessation). Certainly there is much value (and health benefit) to hope, optimism, confidence, persistence, and positive illusions. Polivy and Herman argue, however, that health behavior change is usually more difficult than people realize, and that people additionally

have unrealistic expectations about how much better life will be if the change is successfully made.

I certainly am an advocate of establishing and maintaining healthy behaviors, so why would I give any credence to the notion that “try, try again” may not be the best approach? Among other reasons, continued pursuit of unattainable goals creates a great deal of stress and ultimately can be an ineffective use of one’s resources (time, energy, self-control, motivation, etc.).

Perhaps the key words in this discussion are “unrealistic” and “realistic.” Polivy and Herman address patterns of overconfidence in the pursuit of unrealistic goals for self-change that ultimately may be self-defeating. The more effective strategy is to set realistic and attainable goals. (Keep in mind that what is “realistic and attainable” varies widely from individual to individual.) Confidence follows success. Rather than breeding overconfidence, successful attainment of goals fosters genuine confidence regarding future attainment of other realistic goals.

When it comes to health behavior change, I would modify Palmer’s proverb to read, “If at first you don’t succeed, make sure your goals are realistic and then try again.”

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