

Don't let routines turn into ruts

By Kellie B. Gormly
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The new year has dawned, and most people have made some kind of resolution for 2006 with high hopes for a new start. Yet the melancholy mood of winter -- devoid of the holiday spirit of December -- can sap energy and leave people stuck in whatever they had hoped to change.

"It's the time of turning over a new leaf ... but this time of year, people fall into a feeling of negativity and hopelessness," says Carole Kunkle-Miller, Ph.D. She is a psychologist and life coach with offices in Mt. Lebanon and Upper St. Clair.

Welcome to the rut -- the state of being stuck in some kind of boring routine, or undesirable or stagnant situation that is going nowhere. Ruts can appear in all areas of life, such as relationships, finances, career, physical fitness and health and organization.

"Part of a rut is a routine, and a routine is not a negative; it can be positive and be comforting," says Jan Yager, Ph.D., author of several books, and a speaker, sociologist and professional organizer in Stamford, Conn.

"But too much routine -- if you're not getting from that routine what you need and want -- that's when it can become a rut," Yager says.

But there are ways to spring yourself out of a rut when it's tempting to just curl up on the couch and eat and snooze the winter away.

SEARCH YOUR SOUL

Turn the television off, put the books aside and really sit quietly, reflecting on what is wrong in your life, what you would like to fix -- and most of all, try to pinpoint your dreams. It doesn't matter how big or small they are, so long as you can actively work toward them, says Marcia Wieder, a San Francisco author, speaker and chief executive officer of her online company, www.dreamcoach.com.

"Most of us are so mired in reality ... living from our clocks and our calendars, that we don't really know what our passion or our dreams are," says Wieder, author of books including "Making Your Dreams Come True" and "Life Is But A Dream." She was one of the speakers at the Pennsylvania Governor's Conference for Women, which was held in November in Philadelphia.

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Such a drudgery, Wieder says, can throw people into depression and put them "under the couch instead of on it." Think about what will really make you happy, she says.

"I think people feel powerless because we don't have the time and the energy to go do the things that really make us happy," Wieder says.

START WITH TINY STEPS

The old Chinese proverb -- "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" -- can be literal. You may feel overwhelmed by a fitness rut and weight gain and the possible solutions, for instance. Why not start with a simple walk around the neighborhood once a week? Once you take this first step, the next steps come much more easily.

Kunkle-Miller likes to direct her clients to take one concrete, action-oriented step per week to achieve a goal. She uses the SMART acronym -- Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timelines -- to describe a good goal.

Wieder says that the biggest obstacle to dreams are not time and money, but doubt and fear.

"By taking that first step, you're demonstrating that you're more committed to your dreams instead of your doubt and fear," she says.

KEEP YOUR GOALS REALISTIC

If you don't manage to put your goals with your control, you will end up frustrated and disappointed. You can vow to network and meet more people, for instance, but you can't control whether you meet your future mate or new best friend. Pie-in-the-sky fantasies are not the same thing as dreams, Wieder says; they must be more concrete, whether the dream is to write a best-seller or to spend more time with your family.

CONSIDER PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE

When you've determined what your goals are, you might find you need the help of a professional, whether from therapists, personal fitness trainers or doctors. If you've tried to tackle a rut before and have not succeeded, it's a good indication that professional assistance would be valuable. Also, don't confuse clinical depression with a rut: if you show signs of depression that go beyond the mild listlessness and low motivation of the season, seek professional help, Kunkle-Miller says.

GET ORGANIZED

Maybe you know you need to get more organized and structured -- or, perhaps, something doesn't feel quite right in life and you need a productive project on which to focus your energy. Organizing your household and clearing out clutter are the perfect, energizing solutions with solid results, says Jody Adams, a professional organizer in Greensburg, Westmoreland County, with clients throughout Western Pennsylvania.

"It can change your perspective," says Adams, who calls her business In Its Place. "When you're bored, doing something out of the ordinary ... challenges a different part of your brain. It makes you feel good, because you took some action."

Tackling a mess may seem overwhelming, but you can start with a tiny area -- such as a single shelf, cabinet or drawer -- and later work your way into the whole closet or room. Don't let fear stop you, Adams says once you get started organizing, it feels freeing.

"Whenever you are having a problem and you do one thing that moves you closer to your goal, it sparks a domino effect," she says. "Even if you don't finish it the way you want to, you're still moving forward. Things snowball in a good way."

While you organize, consider rearranging your furniture or doing some redecorating, which can instantly refresh your home and perk you up, experts say.

Some ruts deal with time management, Adams says. Perhaps you felt overwhelmed and overcommitted last year. January is a good time to look at your schedule, evaluate what you really want to be doing, and make some cuts to free up time.

EXPAND YOUR SOCIAL NETWORK

Personal ruts can be the most painful kind, experts say. Maybe you're in a bad relationship with a mate, friend or family member, and things just aren't working. Maybe you long for more fulfilling connections than you have, or recognize an unhealthy pattern in your emotions and relationships. Maybe you simply need more people in your social circle that could become friends and mates.

Professional therapy can help people struggling with many of these issues. If you're struggling with the desire to form new connections with people, though, try to get involved with activities you enjoy, Yager says. She the author of more than 20 books, including "Friendshifts: The Power of Friendship and How It Shapes Our Lives," "Who's That Sitting At My Desk?: Workshop, Friendship or Foe?" "125 Ways to Meet the Love of Your Life," and "Time To Lose: Using Creative Time Management Principles to Finally Win Your Battle With Weight," which will be published in April.

Consider doing volunteer work in an area that is special to your heart, Yager says. Or, join a book club, collectors' club, professional organization or the like. One of the best things you can do is join a gym, Yager says: that way, you can get in shape while making social connections.

"The more you pick something that's a true interest, the more likely you're going to bond through that interest. The friendship stuff will come out of that," Yager says. "It's something you want to do anyway, so if you don't form friendships, it doesn't bother you because you're enjoying the activities."

Do you just need a refreshing shot of excitement to get you started this year?

Try traveling, which can energize and give people a new perspective, and lead to new social connections, experts say. Just be sure to pick a warm travel destination this time of year.

EXAMINE YOUR PROFESSIONAL LIFE

If you're dealing with a professional rut, looking for a new job may be the obvious solution in some cases. However, in your current job, Yager recommends taking more initiative in getting challenging and varied work assignments; don't wait for supervisors to ask you to do something, she says. You also can take advantage of training and educational opportunities that can make you better at your career.

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