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The Danger of New Years Resolutions - Gym, Diet or Rehab?

With a sparkling new year ahead of us and a year of excess behind us, January is the perfect time to turn over a 'new leaf' by making a resolution. The most popular pledges involve weight loss, fitness or quitting smoking, for others it will be more serious as a battle to ditch a dependence on drugs or alcohol. Leading rehabilitation centre The Cabin Chiang Mai see a significant increase in enquiries in the January period, last year patient numbers were twice as high in January than December and enquiries were up by 52% in January compared to December.

The single most common New Year's resolution is to lose weight and as a result gym memberships go up sharply in the month of January. This might mean a cash windfall for the fitness industry, but recent research suggested that in Britain, people waste £37million a year on gym memberships or exercise and slimming classes which they never even use!

It Takes More Than A Change In Lifestyle

The reason that so few people are able to successfully follow through with their well-intentioned resolutions is that lifestyles do not change abruptly when the clock hits midnight on December 31st. The factors which have conspired to make a person for example overweight or addicted to illegal substances in 2011, will not have disappeared just because the calendar reads 2012. Addressing them involves much more than simply signing up to the nearest gym or ditching that last pack of fags.

The same often applies to vows involving alcohol and drugs. People might be sincere in their desire to give up or cut down, but more often than not mere willpower is not enough. Often it depends on the extent of the problem, for example with drugs and alcohol; someone who has a casual or social relationship with either substance might find reducing their intake fairly straightforward, but for an addict it is a long and traumatic process which will normally only be possible with the aid of professional intervention.

It is a running joke that despite the best intentions New Year's resolutions are seldom kept but for anyone who is struggling with alcoholism, drug addiction there is nothing amusing about this particular adage.

Alastair Mordey, an addiction counsellor with over a decade's experience working in addiction treatment feels that it is important to distinguish between the type of resolution which involves merely making a minor adjustment and the sort requiring a radical change of lifestyle.

"If someone wants to drop a dress size or to consume 15 units of alcohol a week instead of 20 then the new year can provide them with the perfect excuse to do it but if someone is struggling with say a cocaine addiction or a serious drinking problem the idea that they will be able to stop just because it is January is a bit ridiculous." he said.

Mordey is currently the Programme Director at The Cabin in Chiang Mai which experiences an annual surge in interest at the beginning of the year, "We have clients coming from all over the world but every year we see a large number of people from countries that celebrate Christmas getting in contact in the New Year. The problem is that rehabilitation programmes fill up fast in January, I worked in London for years and a lot of people found that even though they wanted to get treatment they couldn't because the demand was so high."

Be Realistic With Your Resolutions

His message for anyone who is planning on using January 1st as a catalyst to put an end to a problematic lifestyle is simple, "Be realistic about your resolution. If you are an addict or an alcoholic you are probably not going to be able to give up without professional help and setting yourself unrealistic goals will only make the situation worse. The same would apply to someone who was obese, without a structured program you will not be able to lose the weight. New Year's Eve resolutions might be ok for small steps but for giant leaps a simple promise to yourself is not going to be enough."

This is where the New Year's resolution can be dangerous because it offers a simple, quick fix solution for problems which are often not easily solved. The Cabin Chiang Mai offers an intensive programme that looks at both the addiction and the underlying cause and its location allows clients to get away from their current environment and really concentrate on achieving recovery.

A simple resolution is no substitute for this level of professional help and Mordey is anxious to emphasize that, while this does not mean that the new year's resolution is useless, it should not be given too much significance, "There is no time to make a positive change to your lifestyle like the present. It doesn't matter whether you make the decision on January 1st or June 1st, the important thing is that you come up with a coherent strategy which will allow you to make those changes successfully. For an addict this will inevitably involve seeking professional help and anyone who thinks that the New Year will make giving up old habits any easier is in for an unpleasant surprise."

Editor's Notes:

Alastair Mordey (BA hons, RDAP, ADAP) is the Programme Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin, an addiction treatment centre in Chiang Mai. He is a certified and accredited addiction counsellor with over 10 years' experience working in treatment services. Website: www.thecabinchiangmai.com.

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