

# The Secret to Real Change

by Helene G. Brenner, Ph.D.

Do you make New Year's resolutions? According to a *USA Today* poll conducted a few years ago, more than half of us don't. And the older we get, the fewer we make. Which is not surprising, since fewer than ten percent of people polled reported success with the New Year's resolutions they made the year before.

Why are New Year's resolutions so hard to keep? Heaven knows tons of good advice is available about how to lose weight, or exercise, or handle our finances better (among the top six resolutions, according to the poll, along with "get organized," "find a new job" and "quit smoking"). There's even great advice about how to make goals correctly so as to follow them. Still we fall short. Why?

Could the problem be that we think we can order ourselves around? That in those areas of our lives we're not satisfied with, we have not had enough self-discipline or self-control, but that *this year* we *really* will get ourselves to stop doing the "wrong" things and finally do the "right" things.

I'm not much of a fan of this "boot camp" approach to change. Self-discipline, of course, has its place. Sometimes you really do have to give yourself a little push to do what you know in your heart you want to do. In the more than twenty years of working with women in therapy, I've seen hundreds of women change dramatically—their relationships, their careers, their bodies and their sense of self. Rarely has it come from ordering themselves to change.

So what *does* work to cause change? I'll give you the secret. It's listening, deeply, to your own inner self. Discovering your own story. Listening to what really matters to you. Learning what you really do want—and

also listening to the parts of yourself that get in the way of change. And doing it with self-compassion.

Dana, a social worker who participated in one of my Inner Voice Telegroups, carried the secret shame that she yelled way too much at her three kids. A

therapist herself, she knew it was the wrong thing to do. Year after year for ten years she resolved to control her temper without any success. In fact, the guiltier she felt, the more she yelled.

I suggested that instead of berating herself for yelling at her kids, she give compassion to that part of herself that yells at them. You can imagine her reaction. "How can I be compassionate to that?" she said. "That's just making excuses. I should just *know* better and control myself."

I told her that if she could suspend the self-criticism for just a little while and listen to this part of her, it had a story to share—a story she needed to hear.

During the next twenty minutes, as Dana suspended the self-judgment and listened inside, she heard the "story"—of how much she'd been running on deficit, how each subsequent child taxed her energy more, and how, when her youngest child was born with an abnormal gag reflex, she'd been up several times a night for eight years straight.

She continued to listen further, until the story had run its course. And that's when she fully understood. Shortly before her first child was born, her own mother had died. How much Dana had wanted—and needed—her own mother there, helping her, advising her, reassuring her that she was doing okay as a



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mother. But fate had prevented her from ever having that.

Of course, Dana had grieved her mother, and had known all these things intellectually. But she had never connected them deep down to her yelling. Change happened after she gave compassion to the part of herself that caused her so much guilt and anguish.

After doing this work, Dana's children noticed an immediate difference. "You're much nicer, Mom." When she got angry, she found it easier to stay calm and try a number of ways of reacting besides yelling.

And when she did sometimes still yell (and how many mothers don't?), she found that she could easily stop. Those twenty minutes of listening to her own story permanently changed the way she reacted to her children.

If there is something about yourself or your life

that you're not happy with, try something new. Instead of lecturing yourself about your waywardness, try listening to yourself deeply and caringly. What is your heart trying to tell you? What part of you is hurting, and not "getting with the program" because it wants you to listen?

It's not second nature to do this. Compassionate listening to self takes practice. But it works. In fact, I should warn you: Try this, and you might actually start changing.

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