

Managing Our Ruts by Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

We've all found ourselves with habits or patterns we didn't want, wondering, "How did I get here and, more importantly, how do I get out?" You've heard it takes 21 days to change or develop a habit. If it were only that simple! We all want a silver bullet that will slay our inward dragons (and the dragons of our spouses and children). Problem is, only in Disney movies do frogs suddenly become handsome princes. Real people change by inches. Even if we have that "aha moment", we are still highly prone to falling back into old habits.

Some years back there was a nearly fateful Fathers & Sons Outing up Providence Canyon. Fateful for my car. The road was deeply rutted. The only way not to take out the bottom of my car was to try to drive the sides of those ruts. But driving on the side of the ruts required total concentration. Lose focus for even a moment and my muffler would be toast.

Habits are like ruts. Replacing old behavioral ruts, or developing new desirable behaviors requires a lot of vigilance. When you first started driving a car you were concentrating hard on turn signals, mirrors, how hard to push the brake or gas pedal, staying in your lane, and whether you were doing anything illegal or dangerous. Now you drive from one side of town to the other without giving much thought to the gas, brake, or steering. Those have become largely automatic and unconscious. You've developed a positive rut.

The good thing about ruts is they require almost no attention or mental energy to maintain. But once formed, they don't allow for easy change. Why do most New Year resolutions fail? Because we're dealing with ruts. So if my goal was to exercise but my rut is to watch TV, initially I will have to focus my energies, determinedly, almost desperately, to break out of my rut and get to the gym. Unfortunately, when that day comes when I am tired or frustrated, the energy and determination necessary to keep lifting myself out of the rut may be low ...and I'm back in my rut.

We can get out of negative ruts and develop and maintain new, positive ruts until they become automatic. How? With the help of these 6 suggestions:

1. Decide why YOU want to change. Your reason for change has to really resonate with you. It has to be your reason, not your mom's, bishop's, or friend's. If it isn't a reason that resonates deeply with you, it will never hold up when hit by the inevitable challenges that will arise.
2. Focus on what you want instead of what you don't. Focusing on what you don't want is like fighting with a tar baby. The more you mentally fight, the more stuck you are. Imagine yourself out of the rut. Imagine what it would feel like and what you would be doing differently. Imagining yourself doing something new can make the actual doing of it easier.

3. Think concretely. Be clear on your plan for change. What will my first step be? How will it happen? When? The more detail, the better your chance for success.

4. Plan for the change being hard and plan for setbacks. People who understand how hard change is are more likely to stay as far away from their ruts as possible. Setbacks are more the rule than the exception. Knowing that backsliding is probable allows me to not see backsliding as failure. I can see it as part of the larger picture (rather like stock prices that vascillate but still trend upward overall). There's always a lesson in relapse, if I'm alert enough to learn from it.

5. Adopt the 10% rule. Any change of 10% is worth celebrating as success. Change is progressive. Give yourself room to transform gradually. (Note: there may be some zero tolerance conditions that don't lend themselves to gradual progress.)

6. Have a safety net. Trapeze artists never plan to fall, but they know that it's a possibility. Plan for those days that you have low energy or are depressed. Let trusted others in on what change you're making and how they can be of help on a strenuous day. Call for backup when needed. Put together a list of satisfying alternatives that could help you not return to your rut.