

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

Thoughts on Not Giving Up

Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

Winston Churchill once said “If you are going through hell, keep going.” He said this when Great Britain was going through its ‘darkest hour.’ Consider what a map of the world would look like today if Churchill had said that Great Britain could no longer endure the horror of the war and was ‘giving up’!

Most folks are faced with situations in their lifetime when giving up seems to be the only option; sometimes even giving up just before the point of achieving a huge break-through towards a much sought after goal. Have you ever set a goal for yourself, like losing ten pounds or stopping addictive behaviors? We may start out with great intentions, but then, as the road gets bumpy- we lose the drive and motivation to continue towards our final destination. Just look at how many people go on diets, lose weight, and then gain it back again. It takes effort to stay on track and the right approach, *but it can be done!* It’s important to remember that everyone struggles with staying motivated and reaching their goals- *even successful people*. Thomas Edison, one of our nation’s most successful inventors, said “Many of life’s failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up. *Success means trying one more time.*”

The right approach to stay on track and avoid giving up may include the concept of ‘letting go.’ Many folks confuse ‘letting go’ with ‘giving up.’ Letting go of your past – whether that means an addictive relationship or divorce or deaths of significant others – can be one of the hardest things we can ever do. All human beings to some degree ruminate on the mistakes they have made in the past. I do this, but I have begun to realize that my frustration level increases when I dwell on past mistakes.

As the “Serenity Prayer” indicates, we cannot change our past. However, we can let go and change the focus of our thoughts. By focusing on our *present* and *future* behaviors, our frustration level *decreases*. Instead of beating yourself up for not achieving your goal, focus on your new dreams and develop goals that reflect who you are right *now*. Additionally, forgive yourself for your mistakes. Ruminating on what you could’ve or should’ve done is *ineffective* and *unhealthy*. I often tell veterans that we are more apt to forgive *others* than we are to forgive *ourselves*. Keep this message in mind:

Yesterday is history
Tomorrow is a mystery
But today is a gift,
And that’s why it is called the present.
-Anonymous

All of us experience situations that make us uncomfortable, but feel powerless to change. We often think that there’s no way we can change our views/behavior because we have been doing things ‘this way’ most of our life. That is an irrational belief, which can get us stuck in an

unhealthy pattern of behavior. There is a particular veteran whom I treat at the Atlanta VA for PTSD and substance abuse, who used to have a phrase that he was going to his “f***-it” room. Once he went to this ‘room,’ he gave up on his present and future...he stopped trying. Some of us may have a similar room in which we avoid looking for solutions and give up. Maybe the key to escape this room is to have a preventative plan of action so that we don’t even think about going to the room in the first place. For the plan to be effective, you will need to set realistic goals.

First, identify your goal. Start by writing down the ultimate thing you would like to see happen. When your goal is written on paper, it is then black-and-white. You can see what you need to do. It is much easier to work towards a specific goal than a vague one. I often suggest breaking goals down into *short-term*, *intermediate term*, and *long-term*. Additionally, objectives are *small steps* on how to reach your goal. Achieving short term objectives helps to keep us motivated so that we stay on track. For example, if losing ten pounds is your goal, then a short-term objective might be to sign up for a weight management class. Achieving our objectives is what helps us accomplish our goals. *Short-term* goals and objectives usually take up to two weeks to accomplish. *Intermediate term* goals and objectives usually last up to six months, and long-term goals and objectives can be one year or longer. Also important is to stay connected to people you trust. The keyword in that sentence is **trust**. Find a running buddy, a quit smoking buddy, or someone else with a similar goal. You can support each other. Having a ‘goal’ buddy can make all the difference in times when you don’t feel motivated – like getting up for that early morning run.

Make your goals realistic. People often abandon their goals because their expectations are unreasonable. If your goal is to lose 25 pounds in one month, you most likely will not succeed. If your goal is to quit smoking in one day, after so many years of smoking, it may not be realistic. Unrealistic expectations can lead to the belief that nothing can be changed or achieved and result in ‘giving up.’ This is when some folks retreat to their “f***-it” room.

So you have your plan - you have set realistic goals - and are ‘letting go’ of past mistakes. Now give yourself permission to hold on to things that are most important. You deserve to be happy. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Keep that in mind, and refuse to give up until you reach your destination. You can be an inspiration to others. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said “When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.”

And one more thing, Good Luck!