

The Anatomy of your excuses

Are you talking yourself out of achieving your dreams? Here's how to understand and stop the habit – with tips from a top coach. By *Glynis Horning*

“I’D LIKE TO WORK OUT BUT I DON’T HAVE time” ... “I’d love a new job but it’s too late to study ...” Face it: The biggest obstacle to upgrading your life is *you*. Not because you can’t manage it, but because you’re too frightened or bratty to do what is required, so you hide behind excuses. That’s the “harsh but liberating truth,” according to US life coach Laurie Gerber, of The Handel Group, a global coaching company. “Liberating” because, as the engaging 39-year-old New Yorker explains in a telephone interview, once you see excuses for what they are, you can drop them and do what you need to reach your dreams. “You can only be rooting for one thing at a time: Your dreams, or your reasons for not having dreams – your excuses.” The problem is you don’t see them as excuses: “With time, they become seamlessly interwoven with the way you view and talk about things,” Gerber explains.

UNDERSTAND EXCUSES

1. Excuses have complex layers. “We’re innately offended by not being true to our dreams, so a simple excuse isn’t enough – we need more layers to hide behind,” says Gerber. She remembers a time when she was “growing out of” her clothes. “That was my first level of excuse,” she chuckles ruefully. She followed this by telling herself: “but it’s not that bad” – the next level. This was followed successively by: “I love food,” “healthy food doesn’t taste very good,” “eating healthily isn’t fun on social occasions,” “everyone else eats this way” and “my husband doesn’t mind.” “I was so offended by not living my dream, I had 14 different excuses.”

2. Friends buy your excuses. “They’re mostly your friends because they agree with your excuses or have similar ones themselves,” says Gerber. “It’s much easier to be overweight, cheat on your diet or drink too much if your friends are doing it, too.”

3. Excuses come with feeling bad. “We really think that feeling awful about doing or not doing something will inspire us to do better,” Gerber sighs. It’s a myth: “It feels like we’re repenting, but we’re not. If I feel bad about eating a litre of ice cream, all that makes me do is eat another.”

4. Excuses sound true. “That doesn’t mean they are,” says Gerber. “Okay, boiled spinach might taste a little blah, but when you cut the bad stuff out of your diet, a blueberry tastes divine. I dare you to prove me wrong.”

SPOT THEM

It’s vital to see your excuses for what they are, says Gerber. She suggests starting by noticing where you feel stuck in your life. “Are you struggling to shed weight, get the job you want, improve your relationship with your mother? That’s where you’ll be making excuses.” Ask yourself why you’re stuck, and write down what you think are the reasons. Then examine them one by one, challenging each by arguing the opposite: “As you poke holes in them, you’ll see them for the silly, self-limiting excuses they are.”

It also helps to listen to the voices you use. Excuses come in one of three, Gerber says. The “weather reporter” voice simply reports things the way they are, giving “I have a slow metabolism” or “I don’t have time” the factual

weight of “It’s cold and windy today,” so you accept it as a given. The “brat” voice is that of an annoyed child: “I shouldn’t have to,” “I’m tired,” “She started it.” It often sounds peevish and whiny. The third and most common voice is the “chicken voice” – the voice of fear, heard in: “I don’t think it’s the right time,” “he didn’t seem to be in the mood” or “I need more training.”

SHED THEM

“Excuses cover the truth,” says Gerber, “and the truth sets you free.” Once you can see you’re hiding behind them, you need to figure out the *real* reason you’re not living up to your dreams. So ask yourself outright: “What is the truth?” In her case, she faced up to the fact that she simply “liked to eat what I like to eat when I like to eat it.”

Don’t feel bad – “it’ll make you want to eat more, remember.” Instead, draw up an action plan to reach your dream. Promise yourself to stick to it – and design a consequence to keep you from slipping back behind excuses. “We may suck at fulfilling our dreams, but we can be excellent at avoiding harsh consequences – that’s human nature,” she says.

“So, say you want to get in shape. And let’s say you eat that ice cream. Acknowledge that the inner brat won. Then re-commit, this time with a consequence you design and impose on yourself. For example, next time, you’ll post a picture of the empty ice-cream container on your Facebook page, for everyone to see.” Don’t worry, you won’t have to. “There’s nothing like the fear of public exposure,” she concludes, “to shut the brat in you up.” **Q**

QUICK EXCUSE-BUSTERS

Don't let these common excuses keep you from your dreams:

"I don't have time ..."

Time is yours; you own it, says Durban counselling psychologist Dr. Akashni Maharaj of the Bellair Psychology Centre. "If you value your time, you'll only do things that matter, which is what you prioritise."

"I'm too old ..."

Age is in the mind and if you feel you can't, you won't, she says. "But if you believe you can, you will."

"It won't ever happen for me ..."

The mind is a powerful tool, says Maharaj. "If you utter the words, your heart and mind tend to register and behave accordingly."

"I don't want to hurt others' feelings ..."

Ask yourself whose life you're leading, she says. "If the answer is yours, push yourself ahead and attend to your feelings first. It's not a selfish choice, it's the right choice."

"I'm not good with change ..."

Change is always feared and this is normal, but it can also be liberating, says Maharaj. "It's taking that first step that's the hardest to face."



GIVE-O-WAY

If you're a member of The O Club, you could win a coaching session with Laurie Gerber. The session includes a one-hour cyber-seminar about dreaming and excuse-busting. To enter, visit oprahmag.co.za