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The Gremlins That Hold Us Back

By Molly Patterson, Ed.D.

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You're right on the brink of success. You have been diligent in following your workout plan, eating well, drinking more water than you have in the last 20 years, and sleeping 8 hours every night. You wake up on the morning of your first triathlon feeling well prepared and ready. As you move to the starting line you hear this voice that you know oh so well. She says, "What are you doing? Who do you think you are fooling? You're 50 years old and have only been exercising for the last 6 months. These athletes have been training for years. They are professionals. They are jocks. You don't belong here." You stand at the starting line, deflated, wondering how you might possibly achieve this goal that you have set for yourself. You hope that your family gets bored waiting at the finish line, and leaves so they don't see you hobbling to the end.

What has happened here? Even though the event may be different, most of us can relate to this scenario. That little voice speaks all the worries and doubts that we are unwilling to acknowledge ourselves. These are the doubts that hold us back from reaching the true successes that we know we are capable of. In 1983, psychologist Rick Carson coined the term "gremlins". He defined gremlins as those internal monsters whose words derail our momentum and prevent us from achieving our goals. Who are these gremlins and what are they doing to us?

Carson believes, and anyone who listens to their own gremlins would agree, that each of us house several gremlins. These gremlins are the little monsters, each with his own agenda, who thrive on tempting us to stop the pursuit of our own goals. My own personal favorite gremlin is Lazy Davey. Lazy Davey's ultimate goal is to tempt me to stop my work, because after all it is not really work, and enjoy the day. The great part about Lazy Davey's perspective is that the weather does not even have to be beautiful to indulge in his wishes. Rainy days are better spent at the movies than writing away in my office, according to Lazy Davey. The tough part about this gremlin, at least for me, is that his ideas do sound appealing. I love going to the movies in the middle of the day when everyone else is at work. On beautiful gorgeous days, what is better than taking a long walk in Fairmont Park? But what about those nasty little messages, some subtle, others blatant, suggesting that my work is inadequate? The difficult part about gremlins, and why they are successful at what they do, is that they tap into your own insecurities and fears. Lazy Davey knows that some days I do wonder if my work is worthwhile. Some days it seems like all I produce is schlock. This is rich territory for Lazy Davey. He is well fed on my insecurities and fears.

However, here is the trick. With several thoughtful steps, you can begin to tame these monsters, bred to stop you in your tracks. First and foremost, you must recognize the gremlins who live in your own personal house. Who are they and what are they saying? Naming them and listing out their common phrases can be very helpful in heightening awareness and ultimately taming the gremlins. After all, how can you change what a gremlin is doing if you don't even know if he is in the room?

Becoming well acquainted with which gremlin is present and what he is saying is essential to ridding yourself of your gremlins. When I hear, "it's a beautiful day, let's go out and play. You are not getting anywhere anyway," I know that Lazy Davey is on the scene. Next, recognizing the patterns of when your various gremlins appear can prove enlightening. When they are present, ask yourself, what are you doing and more importantly, what are you feeling? Becoming aware of which emotions x the appearance of the gremlin can be helpful in the beginning to tame him. Finally, and this is the hardest part, once he appears, ignore him. Like a little child, gremlins hate to be ignored. Ignoring their words makes a gremlin go insane.

Don't even engage in his thoughts and comments. If you do this, slowly but surely, your gremlin will disappear. He will move on to a richer feeding ground, somewhere else where the landlord will spend lots of time talking with and believing in him.

Just remember, that those little voices inside of you, your own gremlins, have special needs and wants that feed upon you not reaching your goals. Hear the voices, but move on towards your goals. These days, Lazy Davey is at the movies by himself.

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