

Keeping Those New Year's Resolutions

So many of us start each January 1 with such high hopes. This will be the year we stick to our New Year's resolutions, we tell ourselves. The weight loss goals, the exercise regimen, the pledge to get organized or learn a new skill—regardless of the objectives, the motivation to see them through is at its strongest when the calendar flips.

Of course, quite often that “eyes on the prize” attitude sours in short order—leaving us with a sense of disappointment that we got off track so quickly.

With that in mind, consider focusing on what is commonly the hardest part of resolutions—keeping them well into the new year and beyond. The good news: There are plenty of strategies that can potentially help you do a better job at identifying the right goals for you, framing them so you pursue them consistently, and ultimately generating the outcomes you most want for yourself.

WHY IT'S SO TOUGH

People have been making New Year's resolutions—and often failing to keep them—for a long time. So don't beat yourself up too much if you find yourself falling short of your goals by the time February starts. Certainly many of us find it a whole lot easier to make resolutions than to execute on them.

The good news: If that describes you, it's probably not the case that you have some great moral failing. Turns out there's some science behind humans' pattern of losing interest in New Year's resolutions.

For example, one longitudinal study of “resolvers” published in the National Library of Medicine tracked 200 people who set out to tackle a wide array of milestones in the New Year, with goals both concrete (quitting smoking) and abstract (improving romantic relationships). It found that by a week into January, 77% of study participants had kept up with their resolutions. But that number decreased to 55% by Feb. 1. And it lowered still further to 43% after three months, 40% after six months and just 19% after two years.

The challenge is that creating a new course of action and sticking with it involves changing behaviors—whether building new and healthier habits or jettisoning old, unhealthy ones. And the human brain is a creature of habit, craving the familiar and treading well-worn paths of comforting actions (or inaction, as the case may be). Don't be surprised if it takes around three weeks to start a new habit.

ACTION STEPS

Science also offers ways to stay on track and achieve success, cultivating better habits.

Ultimately, it's how you frame it. In one peer-reviewed study from 2020, for example, researchers studied the success rates of various New Year's resolutions. Their conclusion: “Approach-oriented goals are more successful than avoidance-oriented goals.”

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Translation: You're a lot more likely to find staying power with a resolution that you can build toward, iteratively and proactively, and that gives you positive motivation along the way. That's a better way to frame your goal than a deprivation-based system ("I must give up bad habit X!") that only denies you the things you're used to craving.

Here are some fine-tuned tips to help you carry your January goals right through the calendar year.

- 1. Keep your goals limited and reasonable.** Keep your resolutions to a handful of two or three attainable goals. Don't try to boil the ocean!
- 2. Be specific.** Having numeric benchmarks to work toward and track is an immense motivator. It's not just about "spending less." It's about making a budget and trimming monthly expenditures by X amount. It's not about "eating better," but rather cooking a specific number of healthy dinner recipes at home each week or only getting takeout on weekends.
- 3. Plan it out.** By looking strategically at your goals and then being tactical about divvying them up into discrete and doable milestones, you can set yourself on a good path to success and avoid feeling overwhelmed with something that seems abstract and unattainable.
- 4. Keep an eye on KPIs.** Tracking your progress toward your goal is critical—and it's easier than ever with any number of smartphone apps that can help you make notes, keep a journal or log specific accomplishments along the way.
- 5. Make yourself accountable (but not too much).** The goal of a New Year's resolution is to build a better you. It defeats the purpose of the whole endeavor if you beat yourself up every time you slip up or fall behind on your progress. Holding yourself to account is healthy—but so is being flexible and shrugging off small setbacks.
- 6. Slow and steady wins the race.** "Rome wasn't built in a day" is a cliché—but that doesn't mean it's incorrect. Consistent, day-in, day-out repetition of productive and healthy behaviors can help your resolutions stick.
- 7. But also don't be afraid to change course.** If, a month or two into the new year, you decide your resolution was too ambitious or too broad, it's okay to trim sails and try another tack. Even more modest progress toward a goal is better than abandoning your plan entirely.

Of course, you don't have to make New Year's resolutions at all. The arbitrary date of January 1—and the self-imposed pressure to comply with the goals you set for yourself—may not be worth the agita when all is said and done.

If you do decide to go all in for a transformative, new-year, new-you start to 2025, try to take it easy. Stay motivated, track progress toward your goals, reward small victories and forgive small slipups.

1. Source: J.C. Norcross and D.J. Vangarelli, "The resolution solution: Longitudinal examination of New Year's change attempts," *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 1988-1989.

2. Source: Martin Oscarsson et al, "A large-scale experiment on New Year's resolutions: Approach-oriented goals are more successful than avoidance-oriented goals," *PLoS One*, December 9, 2020.

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