

How to make New Year's resolutions that you'll actually follow

December 29 2011, By Patricia Quigley



Credit: U.S. Navy

Drop 10 pounds. Quit smoking. Stop cursing.

New Year's [resolutions](#) come around every 365 days or so, about the time the tree is tossed, the menorah is stored and one year elbows aside the other. Even though it seems people break them before they have finished making them, those resolutions can be good things.

"Resolutions are important because they promote goal-setting, which is critical to getting things done," said Michael Pantalon, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Conn. via email.

But the reason behind the resolution can be as important as setting goals.

"If [a resolution] is merely an exercise designed to satisfy an external pressure, the importance diminishes and the issue can become moot," wrote Jacqueline Keller, founding director of NutriFit LLC, Los Angeles, and a licensed professional wellness coach, in an email.

Even with the best of intentions, people often break their resolutions.

Pantaloni said people fail due to three main reasons: They promote goals that are too big. They proclaim their goal to the wrong people, those who will pressure them too much or chastise them instead of those who will actually help them realize their goal. They often focus on how to accomplish goals versus why they want to accomplish them, ignoring the "reason behind the reason," which could provide "more powerful and lasting motivation," he said.

"Be very, very clear not only on how you will accomplish your resolution but also on why you want to accomplish it," Pantaloni said. "If you can't come up with good and meaningful reasons that resonate with you, then it's probably not a good resolution."

Resolutions should be more than mere "wishes."

According to Srinivasan Pillay, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Mass., biology plays a role in resolutions, and the brain is the director. Pillay noted that for resolutions to work, they have to take root in the brain, which requires more than simply saying or writing them.

Pillay suggested several tips to make solid resolutions with high probability of accomplishment. Getting excited about your resolutions makes the brain more likely to cement the goal. Forming resolutions in a quiet place will allow the brain to focus on them. It is also important to think them through and phrase them carefully and specifically. Broad

goals such as "I want to lose weight" may be more difficult to implement than statements of action such as "I will change my diet tomorrow in the following ways." Framing the goal as a positive statement and picturing yourself undertaking the actions of the resolution will activate centers in your brain and make you more likely to fulfill it.

"Resolutions are like goals, and we know that the setting of goals helps us to get things done," said Simon A. Rego, assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and director of psychology training at the Montefiore Medical Center in Bronx, N.Y., in an email.

Rego stressed that goals are more likely to be reached if they are "smart," meaning specific, measurable, attainable, rewarding, and time-limited. He cautioned against, for example, simply making losing weight a goal, but instead suggested being more specific, such as "I'd like to lose five pounds over the first two months of the year and then set a new goal from there," he said.

Even the best of intentions don't always play out well.

Psychotherapist Karen R. Koenig, a Sarasota, Fla.-based author and expert on the psychology of eating, noted some individuals can sabotage themselves by reacting against their resolutions and do not succeed. Those who do succeed exhibit an internal desire and high motivation to "simply keep doing what's good for them every day without even thinking about commitments or resolutions," she said.

Breaking an initial resolution doesn't mean a person cannot succeed. And, there's no shame in falling short.

"You are definitely allowed to revise your resolution at any point," said Pantaloni.

Provided by Inside Science News Service

Citation: How to make New Year's resolutions that you'll actually follow (2011, December 29)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-12-year-resolutions-youll.html>

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