

Resolutions linked to 'ideal self' most effective, Stanford psychologist says

January 7 2015, by Clifton B. Parker



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

New Year's resolutions present opportunities to connect to one's ideal self, a Stanford expert says.

Psychologist Kelly McGonigal says that research shows that when people resolve to change, they may immediately feel more confident, in control

and hopeful.

A lecturer in Stanford's Graduate School of Business and senior teacher at the university's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research, McGonigal is an instructor for a Stanford Continuing Studies course on willpower and change and the author of the book, *The Willpower Instinct*.

She talked about New Year's resolutions in a recent conversation with Stanford News Service.

Are New Year's resolutions an effective approach for personal growth?

It depends what kind of resolutions you set. For many people, New Year's Resolutions are an expression of hope, not an action plan for the future. Research shows that when people resolve to change, they immediately feel more confident, in control and hopeful. They even feel stronger and taller, which is kind of ridiculous, but this just shows how uplifting resolving to change can be. If people want to make resolutions as a way to connect to a growth mindset – the belief that through effort and support, you can change and grow in meaningful ways – that's fine. It's not necessarily a tragedy if you fall short.

The problem comes when people fall prey to "false hope syndrome," a term psychologists use to describe the cycle of 1) vowing to change, 2) being surprised by how difficult it is, and 3) giving up, all because the actual process of change doesn't provide the same emotional boost as the initial resolution. Then you get into the territory of people making the same resolution five years in a row, without ever making progress – and you may eventually "learn" from this experience that there's no point in trying to change.

If you're going to make a resolution, I say, either use it as an opportunity to connect to your ideal self, but don't turn it into a reason to beat yourself up when you aren't totally transformed on Jan. 2 – or really reflect on what you want and who you want to be, and invest in yourself from that perspective.

The worst thing to do is make a promise to yourself that you don't really care about and don't really plan to see through.

Are concrete resolutions easier to achieve than more abstract ones?

I can't imagine having one without the other. People who set exceptionally specific goals often succeed, but the small habit doesn't inspire greater change. If you want to create health, setting a small goal – like eating one more serving of vegetables a day – is great. But without remembering the big "why," eating the vegetable can become a kind of game that you feel good about winning – it feels good to mentally check it off your to-do list for the day. But succeeding at this small goal won't necessarily make you identify as someone who cares about your health, and wants to make healthier choices across the board.

The best kind of resolution is one that has a "big why" – to create health, to reconnect with a personal passion, to strengthen an important relationship, to change your financial situation, to develop yourself in some way, or to contribute to others in some way. And then you pick a small action or change that reflects this big goal, to remind yourself of it and to help you take steps toward it.

These can be very small if the "why" is clear, and still lead to big change in the long-term. One of my favorite examples of a small "what" that's been shown to have a major impact is delaying the first cigarette of the

day by 10 minutes. That's doable.

I encourage people to think of a New Year's resolution that small after they've gotten clear on the big "why."

What types of "inner questions" should people ask themselves in developing their goals?

All too often people skip the "why" and go straight for a "what" that they think they can nail. But why vow to change something that isn't connected to the vision you have for your life? It may be a little more intimidating to think about the biggest "why's," but you have a much better chance of making a meaningful resolution.

I like to go big. For example:

- What do I want to experience more of in my life, and what could I do to invite that/create that?
- How do I want to be in the most important relationships or roles in my life? What would that look like, in practice?
- What do I want to offer the world? Where can I begin?
- How do I want to grow in the next year?

Your mindset when you contemplate these questions matters. If people want to seriously engage in the process of change, it takes more than five seconds of reflection.

I have a few favorite "pre-resolution" suggestions:

- List your favorite memories and triumphs of 2014, including the challenges you faced, even if things didn't turn out the way you hoped. This can help you take a big-picture perspective on how

you want to grow.

- Make a list of what you are grateful for in your life. If you make a "gratitude list" first, you might be surprised how it shapes your wish list for 2015.
- Write yourself a letter from your future self, dated 1/1/2016. Imagine looking back at 2015. In your letter, thank your present self for all you did to achieve your goals – and be specific. Or give yourself some compassionate advice from your wiser, 2016 self. This can lead to a reflection on what you might like to resolve for the coming year.

How can people hold themselves accountable to their resolutions?

Find a partner. It doesn't have to be someone who shares the same goal – just see if there's someone in your life who is interested in being a support buddy. Studies show that something as simple as texting a buddy when you take an action toward your goal triples the rate of success.

Another way to hold yourself accountable is to check in with whether the goal feels meaningful, and is serving you well. True self-accountability means paying attention to whether your choices are creating what you want in your [life](#).

Or, is trying to stick to the goal creating more self-criticism or resentment than positive change? Have there been any negative consequences?

For example, you could set the goal to get up one hour earlier to exercise, and find that the sleep deprivation is making you enjoy being a parent less. That would be an excellent reason to hold yourself accountable to changing the "how" of exercising more to something else,

like dancing in your kitchen for two songs after you do the dishes.

How can people cope with failure when they regress on their resolutions?

If you've connected to a big "why," and you have recruited a buddy, you're going to have a much better chance recovering from these setbacks. The other real resource is mindset.

Change involves setbacks – research shows that people who ultimately succeed have no fewer setbacks early on than people who eventually give up. So, the first thing is to expect to fail at some point, and not take it as evidence that change is futile.

One mindset trick I like to use is to imagine that I already know the ending of this story: I have made the change or reached the goal that I set. And so I ask, from that point of view, what did I do that led to the outcome of long-term success?

People give up after setbacks when they don't know the ending –and they suspect it will be "I failed." But you can choose the ending and make it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This perspective – psychologists sometimes call it encoding prospective memories, or making a future memory – can trick your brain into making what you need to do feel very possible and real, as if you've already done it.

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Resolutions linked to 'ideal self' most effective, Stanford psychologist says (2015,

January 7) retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-01-resolutions-linked-ideal-effective-stanford.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.