

Thinking of changing your behavior in 2017? Try moving first

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Credit: Society for Personality and Social Psychology

41% of Americans make New Year's resolutions but only 9% feel they were successful in keeping their resolutions. The problem may be in the timing. According to research being presented at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) Annual Convention the time for successful habit change isn't based on the calendar, but on big changes to our everyday lives like moving to a new home.

"Changing your habits is very difficult," says Bas Verplanken, professor of [social psychology](#) at the University of Bath, "including finding the right moment to make a change."

Everyday choices

Habits develop when we repeat behaviors, and they are reinforced the more everything around us stays the same. Some habits are beneficial, such as brushing your teeth daily. Other habits can benefit communities and affect how we respond to decisions such as recycling, what we buy, and how we commute.

Work from Verplanken and colleagues show habits can be changed when you change the factors around the habit (location, context). Researchers call this the "discontinuity effect."

Why New Year's resolutions don't work

"Changing from December 31st to January 1st is not a dramatic discontinuity," says Verplanken. "Many resolutions are made on December 31st, and go down the drain on January 2nd."

Verplanken notes the New Year may be a nice moment to mark the start of a new phase, but the point of the discontinuity effect is that the change in behavior is embedded in other changes.

"In the case of moving to a new home for instance, people may need to find new solutions for how to do things in the new house, where and how to shop, commute, and so on. All of these aspects are absent when talking about New Year [resolutions](#)."

Location matters

Verplanken studied the behaviors of over 800 people, half of whom had recently moved and half of whom had been at the same home for several years. Participants responded to questions on 25 environment related

behaviors including water and energy use, commuting choices, and waste (food waste, recycling).

According to his research, people who received an intervention and had recently relocated reported more change eight weeks later on a composite of twenty-five environment-relevant behaviors compared to participants who had not recently relocated.

These results were consistent in spite of the strength of previous habits and views, and are consistent with research from others.

Verplanken will present his talk, [Empowering Interventions to Promote Sustainable Lifestyles: Testing the Habit Discontinuity Hypothesis in a Field Experiment](#) on Friday, January 20, 2017 at the [SPSP Annual Convention](#).

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

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