

# How to be happier in 2021

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So you want to look trimmer, be smarter, and successful next year? You strive to exercise and call your friends more, and spend less?

You are not alone. New Year's resolutions are as ubiquitous as they are difficult to keep. Does it even make sense to set such lofty goals for the

[new year](#), hoping anew each January first that this time really is the charm?

Any motivational researcher would have "ambivalent feelings" about New Year's resolutions, says Richard Ryan, an international expert on motivational research and professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Rochester. "The evidence shows that most of the time people aren't successful at them."

But don't throw in the towel quite yet. Ryan, who is also a clinical psychologist, says that any occasion that gives us an opportunity to reflect on our lives is ultimately a good thing. It doesn't have to be on New Year's. "Whenever that happens, if it's really a reflective change—something that you put your heart behind—that can be good for people."

And he has another tip: what proves most satisfying, and may also be what's most needed as the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, are goals that involve giving to others.

"Think of how you can help," says Ryan. "There's a lot of distress out there: If we can set goals that aim to help others, those kinds of goals will, in turn, also add to our own well-being."

His advice is grounded in decades of research. Together with Edward Deci (also a University of Rochester professor emeritus of psychology) Ryan is the cofounder of self-determination theory (SDT), a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality. Developed by the duo over nearly 40 years, the theory has become one of the most widely accepted frameworks of human motivation in contemporary behavioral science. Its starting point is the idea that all humans have the natural—or intrinsic—tendency to behave in effective and healthful ways.

According to Ryan, who is also a professor at the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at Australian Catholic University, acts of willingly helping others satisfy all three of the [basic psychological needs](#) identified in SDT research: the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy in this context means that you can engage in activities in which you feel true volition and find personal value. Competence means feeling effective and having a sense of accomplishment. Finally, relatedness means working with and feeling connected to others.

"If you want to make a New Year's [resolution](#) that really makes you happy, think about the ways in which you can contribute to the world," says Ryan. "All three of these basic needs are fulfilled. The research shows it's not just good for the world but also really good for you."

## **What's the problem with most New Year's resolutions?**

The saddest part is that most people don't succeed at their January 1 resolutions. But that is because most of these midnight resolutions look more like pressure coming from the outside—an attempt to look better, relieve guilt, or meet the standards of others. Losing weight, for example, is one of the most common New Year's goals and one that people tend to do poorly at. Part of the reason for that is where it's coming from: it's often coming from internal or external pressure—as opposed to a [goal](#) that's something that you might intrinsically value such as having more health or vitality. If the goal is one that is not "authentic" and not really coming from your own values or interests, the energy for it fades fast.

## **Are any resolutions particularly toxic?**

There are many goals that even when achieved will not bring people more happiness. A goal of making more money, for example, may get a person working harder, but may actually leave them less connected to others, or feeling less autonomy on a day-to-day basis. It could make the person less happy. Goals that work are ones where we can find real satisfaction in achieving them.

## **It's intuitive that giving to others is satisfying. But how does that work on a psychological level?**

We found that when people are focused on giving to others they experience deeper satisfactions than when their goals are more self-oriented. For example, experiments show that doing something benevolent for others, even when you will never meet the beneficiary, increases your positive mood and energy. Most recently, we published a study [in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*] about what we call people's "integrative span." We discovered that your happiness increases as your focus of concern and care gets wider. If your main concerns and cares are narrow and selfish—just about "me and the people very close to me," versus about "my family and my community," versus about "the larger world and everything in it"—the less happy you are prone to be. A broader scope of caring and concern for others, in contrast, predicts a higher well-being.

## **How do we make any resolution more likely to stick?**

Beyond the focus of your goals, there are some key elements to success at any resolution you might make. First, make sure your goal is one you truly embrace—that you are fully behind and care about. An achievable goal is also one that is not abstract, like "improve my health" but concrete—such as "increase my daily step count" or "drink sparkling water rather than sugared soda at lunch." These latter goals are clear and

achievable in a way that a vague global resolution can never be. Once having a clear aim, the next step is making a realistic plan on how and when it will be implemented.

Just as important, research shows that the more you can make achieving your resolution fun and "intrinsically motivated" the more you'll persist. For example, a plan to increase your step count might include a walk each day with a good friend—which will both achieve your step goal and satisfy relatedness needs. By finding an activity that both gets you to your goal and that you actually enjoy—or at least don't find aversive—you'll be more likely to carry on.

Finally, successful resolutions are usually built upon optimal challenges. Setting the bar too high will feel discouraging and lead to disengagement. Keep in mind that with almost any long-term goal the best strategy is to set small incremental goals—not "I'm going to climb Everest" but rather "I'm going to take these first few steps toward base camp."

## **Any special advice for 2021?**

The past year has been tough; you can make the new one kinder. Any new goals you set that involve changing habits or lifestyles will inevitably involve some setbacks, lapses, and failures. So when failures happen, remember to be a compassionate self-coach. Forget the harsh judgments and instead take interest in what you can learn from the setback and where you got stuck. And then restart with that much more wisdom in hand.

## **How do I find the goal I ultimately most care about?**

For most of us, if we give ourselves occasional moments of reflection-

taking the time to really think about what's going well in our lives and what really matters—we can usually identify some things we could change. Often that means listening to that little nagging feeling about the things that we know would improve our lives. It means allowing ourselves to tune into that inner signal in an open, non-defensive way and to consider the possibilities and the choices that you really have. In truth, there are always ways to make life better, but the road upward need not be a painful one—if you are going in the right direction.

**More information:** Emma L. Bradshaw et al, A configural approach to aspirations: The social breadth of aspiration profiles predicts well-being over and above the intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations that comprise the profiles., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/pspp0000374](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000374)

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