

# Got health goals? Research-based tips for adopting and sticking to new healthy lifestyle behaviours

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New Year's resolutions are an annual ritual of setting intentions for self-betterment, and health behavior goals—such as improving healthy eating

and physical activity—are among the most popular. Unfortunately, failing to stick to those new goals is so common that it has become a cliché.

This is backed by [research evidence](#). Studies have repeatedly shown that over half of people who form [health](#) behavior intentions [fail to enact them](#).

There are caveats to this statistic, of course. Short-term health behavior goals are [more likely to be enacted than long-term](#), and those who are returning to a pattern of behavior they used to practice are [more likely to follow through with their intentions](#) compared to those who are adopting a new health behavior.

It's important to note that having an intention to change behavior is an essential first step. Few people regularly engage in healthy behaviors [without those initial good intentions](#). Sticking to health behavior goals, however, is the critical factor.

## **Why do we struggle with health behavior goals?**

[Self-regulation is an extensive research topic in psychology](#). As a professor of health psychology, my research focuses on understanding the "intention-behavior gap" in [physical activity](#), and testing interventions that may help close this gap.

My own research, and studies from my colleagues, has shown evidence that difficulty in following through on intentions often comes from two sources. The first is strategic challenges, which are flawed approaches to thinking about goals and behavior. The second is basic human tendencies when faced with what psychologists call [approach/avoidance](#) conflict: when something is appealing and unappealing at the same time.

In terms of strategic challenges, the details of the goal itself can be one of the first indicators of whether someone will struggle. For example, the intention to engage in physical [activity](#) is often based on [desired long-term outcomes](#) (such as weight control, fitness and reducing the risks of chronic disease) without due consideration of the [time and effort required to perform regular physical activity itself](#).

Another key strategic challenge is the [failure to consider multiple goals](#), which is likely to under-estimate the [resources needed to perform other behaviors](#). Juggling multiple goals is one of the prime reasons why new intentions are often abandoned: new behaviors like exercise must compete with or coincide with all the other things someone needs or wants to do.

Contemporary research also shows that people may have automatic tendencies that, on balance, tend to derail health behaviors. For example, people have a basic underlying tendency to [approach experiences that are pleasant and avoid experiences that are unpleasant](#).

Physical activity can be an adverse experience for many because it requires the body to stop resting and experience some exhaustion and discomfort. This negative experience *during* the activity is [more predictive of future behavior](#) than the positive feelings *after* one completes a bout of physical activity.

Relatedly, [research stemming from evolutionary biology](#) has supported a basic human tendency to minimize [energy costs](#), which stems from an evolutionary survival necessity. This makes people tend to avoid unnecessary movement (like exercise) while increasing their energy stores (snacking on energy-dense foods), creating an [underlying temptation to ditch our healthy eating and physical activity plans](#).

## **Effective strategies for sticking with intentions**

When we understand why we are not enacting our new health behavior goals, it can help in developing counter-measures. Research in this area is ongoing, with diverse approaches. Strategies can be prospective (i.e. developed before enactment of the goal) or reactive (i.e. used at the point of enactment decision) in their implementation.

To overcome strategic challenges, research has shown the [effectiveness of developing detailed plans](#), such as formulation of what you are going to do, how, where and when you will do it, followed by contingencies if there is a conflict with your plan.

[Monitoring your goals regularly](#) is also one of the most successful approaches to keeping a behavior on your radar.

In terms of our more automatic tendencies to disrupt health behavior intentions, [a focus on the behavioral experience itself](#) is critical. Making the health behavior as pleasant, convenient and meaningful to you as possible, and performing it at times when you have the most energy (to fight temptations), will help [increase the probability of following through](#) on good intentions.

However, in times when you are faced with a strong urge to abandon your health goal for a more immediately gratifying diversion, this is when you want to [take a moment to acknowledge your primal feelings, but enact your valued intentions](#).

It's important to keep in mind that most of the health changes people are trying to make with these good intentions are lifestyle behaviors. As such, a few slipped days are inconsequential to the overall [goal](#).

There is also theory and evidence that [self-regulation](#) strategies like the ones above [may become less necessary over time](#). This is because people begin to form habits from repeating these actions, as well as a sense of

satisfaction or identity from continual practice that enables them to take ownership of the behavior and categorize themselves in the role. So sticking to those intentions in the short term will likely make it easier to continue over a lifetime.

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