

What fitness marketers don't tell you about New Year's resolutions

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It's a new year and like millions of Americans, you may be looking forward to crafting a "new you"—healthier, thinner, faster, with lots more muscle definition.

But before you pledge to lose one-fifth of your body weight or run eight miles a day, Northeastern University psychology professor Rachel Rodgers would like you to slow down, take a few deep breaths and consider what kinds of healthy tweaks are sustainable, not to mention enjoyable.

New Year's is for fitness marketers

Being healthy is all about taking compassionate care of oneself, says Rodgers, an associate professor of applied psychology at Northeastern's Bouvé College of Health Sciences and an expert on body image and eating disorders.

January is the time of year when fitness marketers really pour it on, running commercials, ads and sales for everything from gym memberships to exercise bikes and collagen protein powders.

Marketers capitalize on the seasonal evaluations that come with the start of the New Year to apply pressure for people to purchase their products and services, Rodgers says.

"Reminding oneself that this is all a ploy, and one doesn't have to fall prey to these marketing tactics can be really helpful," she says.

The seasonal marketing campaign is so expected that Equinox gyms garnered attention—and criticism—for launching an ad campaign saying they were not signing up new members on New Year's Day because "January wants to find a shortcut" and "We don't speak January."

Marketing campaigns are generally of two types, Rodgers says.

Deficit marketing implies that potential customers "are not good enough. And in order to be better, we need to purchase this thing," she says.

Values marketing harnesses a product to a value and sells the notion that if you are a particular type of person "you need to be buying this product," Rodgers says. "It's essentially about being this 'good person.'"

'Healthism' is a thing

Most people would agree that working out and eating healthily are good things—but that doesn't mean doing them makes you a better person, Rodgers says.

And yet that's the implication of something researcher Robert Crawford calls "healthism," Rodgers says.

"It's this idea that if we're not in active pursuit of a healthier self, we are in some ways morally deficient," Rodgers says.

Whether it's counting daily steps or driving bad cholesterol points, "there's this idea that we should all be working toward improving those numbers," she says. "That is part of a social context that has a moralizing element around health."

Deciding to engage in more [physical movement](#) or other healthy activities can be a positive and powerful move, Rodgers says.

"What's tricky is when it comes from this idea that we should all be constantly engaging in self improvement. It then becomes a source of guilt if you're not doing it. Few good things come out of shame or guilt. It's just not a good driver."

Avoiding responsibility for systemic inequities

The emphasis on individual "good" health practices also prevents

individuals from holding society responsible for systemic and institutional injustices that have inflicted harm on the health of people from under-represented communities, Rodgers says.

In recent years a number of studies, including a 2020 study from the National Center for Biotechnology Information, have linked discrimination to inflammation and obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Societal conditions can be "very strong determinants of health outcomes," Rodgers says. In addition, access to [nutritious food](#) and medical care plays a role in maintaining good health and body weight, she says.

It's a process, not a revolution

Another issue Rodgers has with New Year's resolutions is that they are about a single outcome that may or may not be difficult to achieve.

"A lot of times they are about achieving a thing. And I personally find it more helpful to think about things in terms of process."

Think about what you enjoy doing and incorporate it into a routine, Rodgers says.

Rodgers prefers not to offer specific suggestions. She says she would prefer that people look within to see what would suit them best.

"Ask yourself, 'Can I move my body in a way that brings me joy?'" she says. "Focus on the feeling."

"Experiment with a range of things," Rodgers says. Some people may want to try meditating for 10 minutes a day. Others will want to join a

weightlifting class.

"I don't have the answer. The answer is in you," Rodgers says.

Think special feast, not binge

Rodgers, who got her Ph.D. in France, has a positive attitude toward the pleasure of holiday meals.

It's OK to eat special foods on special occasions, she says. "It doesn't make it good or bad. It's just different."

What's not helpful is to binge on treats while anticipating a new, "purer" self emerging in January who will dine only on low-calorie salads even on the coldest of winter days.

"I would like us to move away from that," Rodgers says. Don't think of denying yourself—think of trying out a new habit you would enjoy and see how it goes, she says.

Small steps that can be integrated into [daily life](#) may be preferable to setting yourself up to fail or succeed with a big challenge.

Setting a goal of revolutionizing your life as of January risks making the bar too high, Rodgers says.

"That can lead to a place of black or white thinking that 'Everything has failed, so there's no point now,' rather than a state of mind that's more flexible and compassionate and sees this as a journey. It's all about being in tune with yourself."

Provided by Northeastern University

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