

The science behind building healthy habits can help you keep your New Year's resolution

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In a study of nearly 10 million marathon times, there were far more finishes at 3:59 than at 4:01, which suggests that having a clear target may have helped people run faster. Credit: Pixabay

Every New Year, millions of people make resolutions, with the most common [resolutions being health-related](#). Despite their popularity, [up to](#)

[80% of resolutions fail](#), mostly within a few weeks. As a result, many [people make the same resolutions year after year](#).

At the same time, [resolutions](#) can bring focus to an area that's important to you. I research the importance of behaviors to health, and write the [Become Your Healthiest You](#) blog. Here's how using scientific strategies can increase your chances of success with your resolution.

Setting SMART resolutions

Resolutions are like goals and putting time into planning your resolution can increase your success. Using the SMART goal framework (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely) is a good foundation for setting your resolution.

A specific resolution is clear and focused. Unfortunately, [most people set vague resolutions](#), such as wanting to exercise more, be healthier or lose weight. While admirable, resolutions that provide a clear description of what you want to achieve (exercise three times a week for 30 minutes, lose five pounds) provide more direction and are more readily attained.

Also, aim for positive resolutions such as eating more vegetables, in contrast to eating no junk food. Positive resolutions are approach-oriented, while negative ones are avoidance-oriented. In a survey of 1,066 people, those who had [approach-oriented resolutions were more likely to be successful](#).

A measurable resolution means you can assess when you've achieved it. A goal of eating healthier is hard to measure, whereas a goal of eating three fruits a day can be easily measured. Essentially, your resolution becomes a target. And a target can also bring focus to your resolution, such as with wanting to run a marathon under four hours. In a [study of nearly 10 million marathon times](#) there were far more finishes at 3:59

than at 4:01, which suggests that having a clear target may have helped people run faster.

You also want your resolution to be attainable, which means it's realistic for you to achieve. Big, long-term resolutions may be more easily approached by breaking them into smaller ones. However, your resolution also needs to be challenging, as [challenging ones result in better performance](#) and are also found to be [more satisfying](#) than easier resolutions.

A relevant resolution is one that's meaningful to you. For example, exercising so you can have more energy throughout the day.

Relevant resolutions are more likely to be intrinsic in contrast with extrinsic ones, which are externally motivated (such as getting a promotion, winning a trophy or receiving praise). Extrinsic resolutions tend to be fleeting while intrinsic resolutions are associated with [greater well-being](#) and [satisfaction](#).

The last part is having a resolution that's timely. This means having a deadline for when you wish to achieve it. A resolution without a deadline rarely gets done. A timely resolution helps prioritize your days and weeks leading up to it. If your resolution is to lose five pounds in two months, this can be the foundation for your plan on how to achieve it.

Succeeding at your resolution

Having a good implementation plan is as key as having a clear resolution. In some cases, you may need to change your environment to be more supportive of your resolution. This may mean moving snacks out of sight, putting your workout gear near the front door or using sticky notes as reminders.

If your resolution requires starting a new habit, combine it with a habit you already do. If you want to floss your teeth, combine it with brushing your teeth. Combining a new habit with an old one is referred to as piggybacking, stacking and temptation bundling.

Temptation bundling is a more specific version of piggybacking in which you choose an activity you enjoy and bundle it with your newly desired activity. If you want to start exercising, bundle it with a favorite TV show, podcast or music. People who used temptation bundling with audiobooks were [more likely to keep up with their exercise routine](#).

To encourage yourself along the way, try positive thinking. This can be as simple as saying to yourself *I can do this, I'm proud of myself for trying* or *I have the power to change my mind* a few times each day. Positive thinking may help [increase perseverance](#) and is believed to [increase the neurotransmitters dopamine](#) and [serotonin](#), associated with pleasure and mood, which can reinforce behaviors.

Enlisting the support of others can also help in achieving your resolution. People with greater [social support](#) networks are [more likely to achieve their goals](#).

Social support can be broken into four categories:

- instrumental support consisting of someone doing something for you, such as driving you to the gym or helping in [meal planning](#);
- informational support in the form of someone giving you advice, whether it be from family, friends or professionals such as your doctor or a dietitian;
- appraisal support, including evaluation and constructive feedback, which may come from the same people who provide informational support; and
- [emotional support](#) from people providing love, empathy and

caring.

Challenges and setbacks happen

Even with proper planning, challenges and setbacks can happen and are a normal part of any process of changing one's behavior or attempting something new.

Some setbacks may be temporary, such as an illness interrupting your exercise program. Others may occur regularly, such as dinner parties that may affect your desire to eat a healthy diet. These challenges can be minimized by planning ahead. In this example, your plan may include contributing a meal to the dinner that fits your needs.

If a setback occurs, accept this as a natural part of the process. Focus on the progress you've made so far and review your plan. What has worked for you to date? Is there anything you need to revise to account for any future challenges?

Starting a new behavior can sometimes be a process of trial and error, and learning from setbacks can support future success. Good luck and Happy New Year!

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