

Why New Years Resolutions Don't Work - And What To Do About It

Every New Year's Eve, it seems to be the custom to make a resolution to change some situation in our life that we're not so happy about. Then, a week later, the resolutions are long forgotten as we get back into the noise of everyday demands. Why is it then, that even though resolutions rarely succeed, we still make them year after year? Most resolutions fail because of a lack of understanding of how they work. Here are 10 reasons why traditional "resolution setting" does not work, and what you can do to overcome these common traps.

1. Resolutions are made to "stop" or "lose" something

Success in your resolution has a lot to do with how you frame it. Resolutions often have negative contexts to them, which is not so motivating (especially when the going gets tough). And we make them usually in areas of our life that are the result of habits built up over a lifetime (i.e. smoking, weight). When we say out loud that we want to "stop smoking" or "stop eating sweets", the unconscious mind forgets the "stop" and focuses on the other part of the statement. That's one important reason why we end up craving what we want to stop. Solution: Instead of framing your resolution as a loss or a sacrifice, express it as a "gain" or "start". Make it something you want to run towards ("pull") rather than running away from ("push"). Instead of "Stop eating sweets", say "start eating more vegetables". Instead of "lose weight", say "gain muscle strength".

2. The resolution describes a result, without referencing behavior

Have you heard of the definition of insanity: "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result"? Many people state resolutions to lose weight or start a savings account, but are not willing to change what they do on a daily basis to create the new behavior. By framing the resolution as a change in behavior, you have more control over the actual outcome. Solution: Frame the resolution as a change in behavior. Instead of "lose weight", say "go to the gym 4 mornings a week".

3. There is no consequence to failing or abandoning the resolution

If there is no consequence to abandoning the resolution, why make it in the first place? What is the price you are paying to maintain the results you currently have in the area of your resolution? Is the price high enough to force you to make a change? What is the reward for you to succeed? Does the reward outweigh the price? If not, then there is little motivation for you to change, and you will (consciously or unconsciously) abandon your resolution. Solution: Make the price of the status quo very high, or the reward very attractive. Set a special reward for yourself if you succeed in your resolution, a trip, or gift, something that commemorates your achievement. Set it up in such a way that you only enjoy the reward if you succeed!

4. Resolutions are made at the last minute

Resolutions set at the last minute, or without adequate consideration, are hard to take seriously. Sometimes, we make a resolution because we "have" to, following the crowd or a fashion. You do not have to necessarily start your resolutions on January 1. If you are just starting to consider your resolutions, give yourself enough time to make sure that this is something you really want to do, for yourself.

5. The resolution is vague

Vague resolutions are not motivating, and are a key reason why resolutions are abandoned. The more precise you are about your goal, the more likely you will succeed. Use the "SMART" principle to describe your resolution: -->SPECIFIC - Describe the details of your goal (feel, taste, hear, smell, look) -->MEASURABLE - How much? How many? How will I know that I have reached my goal? -->ACTION-ORIENTED - Does the goal compel me to take action? Are the steps that I need to take clear? What actions will I take to reach this goal? -->REALISTIC - Is it physically possible to achieve this? Does the resolution respect the laws of physics, chemistry and physiology? Do I have the abilities and resources needed to reach the goal? What do I need to develop or obtain to succeed at this? -->TIME-FRAMED - When will I make this happen? When will I start? When do I need to be complete?

6. The resolution is too big

Many results in our life are the outcomes of lifelong habits. It is unrealistic to change many of them overnight. There is no such thing as an unrealistic goal, simply overambitious timetables. Make sure you give yourself challenging (but physically doable) goals and timelines. Use the concept of "milestones" (4-6 week intermediate goals) and "heartbeats" (daily intentions) to subdivide your large goal into doable smaller steps.

7. There is little or no support to carry out the resolution

It is possible that you could make your resolution happen by yourself, but why would you want to? A support system gives you the added edge you need to stay on track and do what you say you will do. Your support system should include active components (a buddy or partner, expert resources, support groups, mentor or role model, coach) and passive components (books, tapes, videos, magazines, pictures, treasure maps, affirmations, journaling, etc)

8. The resolution is not written down

Spoken resolutions simply vanish with their echo. Write down your resolution, and you are already halfway to making it happen, because you create accountability with yourself in doing so. Write down your resolution with the "SMART" format listed earlier, and post it in a place where you can read it every morning. The strongest way to make this work for you is to write it in the form of a contract with yourself, signed and dated.

9. Success in the resolution depends on someone else

Giving the power over the success of the resolution over to someone else is a guarantee of failure. How can you change what you cannot control? Do you have control over the resolution? A powerful test is to imagine yourself stranded on a desert island with all the resources and time you need. Could you make this resolution happen totally on your own? For example: "Get promoted this year" is a poor formulation because you do not have control (usually) over your own promotion. A better way to phrase it is "Get the highest client satisfaction ranking", which is something you have control over, and it can lead to your promotion, a raise, or other recognition.

10. There is no commitment behind the resolution

Full commitment means more than just saying, "I will do it". You have to get clear on four questions: What do you want? Why is this important to you? Why is now the time to make this change happen? And, most importantly, why do you deserve this change? Exploring these questions with an experienced personal coach will help you align your commitment with your values, so that it becomes crystal clear to you why you need to make this resolution real. Once you do so, then nothing can shake you off of your resolve. And next thing you know, your resolution will have successfully become reality!