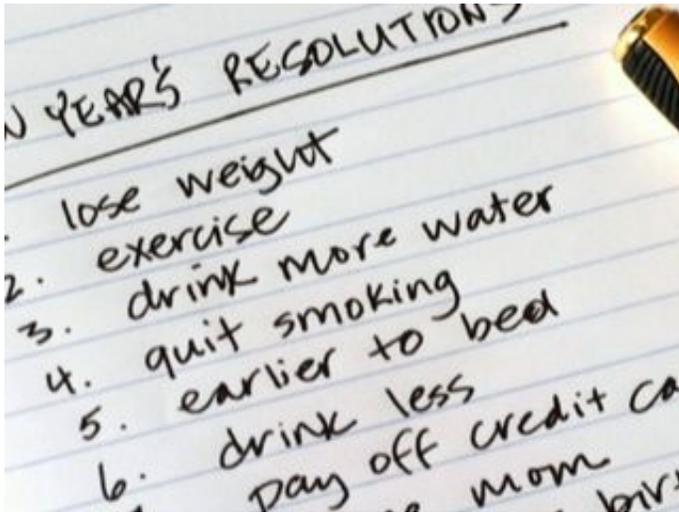


Why Do We Fail To Keep Our New Year's Resolutions?

The start of the New Year is often the perfect time to turn a new page in your life, which is why so many people make New Year's resolutions. But why do so many people have a hard time keeping their resolutions?



Source: www.op4training.com

Some estimates say more than 40% of Americans—make New Year's resolutions. (For comparison, about one-third of Americans watch the Super Bowl.) But for all the good intentions, only a tiny fraction of us keep our resolutions; University of Scranton [research](#) suggests that just 8% of people achieve their New Year's goals.

Researchers have looked at success rates of peoples' resolutions: The first two weeks usually go along beautifully, but by

February people are backsliding. And by the following December most people are back where they started—often even further behind. Why do so many people not keep their resolutions? Are people just weak-willed or lazy?

According to researcher John Norcross and his colleagues, who published their findings in the [Journal of Clinical Psychology](#), approximately 50 percent of the population makes resolutions each New Year. Among the top resolutions are weight loss, exercise, stopping [smoking](#), better money [management](#) and debt reduction.

Timothy Pychyl, a professor of psychology at Carleton University in Canada and a fellow PT blogger, [says that](#) resolutions are a form of "cultural [procrastination](#)," an effort to reinvent oneself. People make resolutions as a way of motivating themselves, he says. Pychyl argues that people aren't ready to change their habits, particularly bad habits, and that accounts for the high failure rate. Another reason, says Dr. Avya Sharma of the Canadian Obesity Network, is that people set unrealistic goals and expectations in their resolutions.

Psychology professor Peter Herman and his colleagues have identified what they call the "[false hope syndrome](#)," which means their resolution is significantly unrealistic and out

of alignment with their internal view of themselves. This principle reflects that of making positive affirmations. When you make positive affirmations about yourself that you don't really believe, the positive affirmations not only don't work, they can be damaging to your [self-worth](#).

The other aspect of failed resolutions lies in the cause and effect relationship. You may think that if you lose weight, or reduce your debts, or exercise more, your entire life will change, and when it doesn't, you may get discouraged and then you revert back to old behaviors.

Making resolutions work involves changing behaviors—and in order to change a behavior, you have to change your thinking (or "rewire" your brain). Brain scientists such as Antonio Damasio, Joseph LeDoux, and psychotherapist Stephen Hayes have discovered, through the use of MRIs, that habitual behavior is created by thinking patterns that create [neural pathways](#) and [memories](#), which become the default basis for your behavior when you're faced with a choice or decision. Trying to change that default thinking by "not trying to do it," in effect just strengthens it. Change requires creating new neural pathways from new thinking.

Peter Bregman, writing in the [Harvard Business Review Blog](#) Network, argues "When we set goals, we're taught to make them specific and measurable and time-bound. But it turns out that those characteristics are precisely the reasons goals can backfire. A specific, measurable, time-bound goal drives behavior that's narrowly focused and often leads to either cheating or myopia. Yes, we often reach the goal, but at what cost?" Bregman advocates creating an area of focus rather than goals, and goes on to say that "An area of focus taps into your intrinsic [motivation](#), offers no stimulus or incentive to cheat or take unnecessary risks, leaves every positive possibility and opportunity open, and encourages [collaboration](#) while reducing corrosive [competition](#). All this while moving forward on the things you and your organization value most."

Some psychologists propose that often people aren't making resolutions for the right reasons. They think that because it's a new year, they're obliged to say they'll change their behaviour. But once they face the reality of what they're doing, they give up because they aren't motivated enough in the first place.

Ask yourself this question: If there were no pressure from others, would you want to change? Studies have shown that people are more likely to succeed in changing their

behaviour when they are motivated by internal rather than external forces.

Is it a matter of will power? Many people assume that willpower is a [character trait](#) that you're either born in with, or innately lack. But research suggests that willpower is more complex than that: it can be trained, but it also relies on energy and can become depleted if you overuse it.

"Just like a muscle, the amount of willpower you have at any given time rises and falls, and if you exercise it, it gets stronger," says social psychologist Roy Baumeister, the Francis Eppes Professor at Florida State University. He has spent years studying how people regulate their emotions, resist temptation, break bad habits, and perform up to their potential -- and why they often fail to do so. His new book, *Willpower, Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, was written with co-author and New York Times science writer John Tierney. He was interviewed in the [Atlantic](#) magazine and offers a clear picture of just why willpower is so tricky and so often misunderstood. Among his conclusions were the following:

- "Each person's supply of willpower is limited. And, as the "power" aspect of willpower implies, it's a form of energy. It gets depleted when you use it. So keeping New Year's resolutions depends on the basic energy supply that the person needs for all other acts of [self-control](#), as well as other things, like [decision-making](#). A day in which you have had to make a number of tough decisions is likely to be a day you'll be sorely tempted not to follow through on your resolutions.
- One common problem is that people make multiple resolutions. These are all effectively commitments to use one's willpower. Unfortunately, just making the resolution doesn't increase your supply. When you have several resolutions, each time you try to keep any of them, you use up some of the precious willpower that is needed to keep the others. In other words, multiple resolutions all work against each other and undermine each other's chances of success.
- Our research shows that people with good self-control actually spend less time resisting desires than other people, because they avoid problem situations and cultivate good habits. These enable them to get the most out of their willpower. They may not actually have more willpower, but they use it more wisely. [Understanding](#) how willpower works can be a powerful key to a happier, more successful life.
- Habits do not actually increase willpower -- they conserve it. A habit is a pattern of

automatic behavior. Behaving automatically requires less effort than deliberately exerting conscious control over one's actions. The most successful people use their willpower to set up effective habits, rather than relying on it to bail them out of trouble or cope with problems.

- Pre-commitment is another class of helpful strategies. When people choose what they are going to eat well in advance, they eat better than when they decide, impulsively, what and how much to eat on each occasion. Pre-commitment includes things like automatic savings plans that transfer some of your paycheck into a savings account, without you having to make a decision each time.
- As for a starter resolution, we recommend you begin with something small and doable. Pick a small positive change that you'd like to make in your life. Don't start with a tough one, like losing 30 pounds or quitting smoking. Start with something like making your bed each morning, or cleaning up the dishes right after dinner, or not swearing in front of the children. And then follow through. If you succeed at this easy one, it will actually strengthen your willpower, thereby improving your ability to succeed at the next, more difficult one. Once you have a series of successes under your belt, you will be better able to tackle the really tough ones, like smoking or losing weight."

The success of resolutions has much to do with the issue of breaking bad habits and establishing new, more desirable ones. Habits form through repetition of the same behavior in response to the same cue. Researchers have discovered that the first few times you do something are the most strongly habit-forming; although [separate research](#) suggests it takes 66 days on average to form a new habit. This study also revealed that some behaviors are easier to habitualize than others.

Having said all that, if you feel compelled to make New Year's resolutions, here's some tips to help you make them work:

1. Focus on one resolution, rather several and set realistic, specific goals. Losing weight is not a specific goal. Losing 10 pounds in 90 days would be.
2. Don't wait till New Year's eve to make resolutions. Make it a year long process, every day.
3. Take small steps. Many people quit because the goal is too big requiring too much effort and action all at once.
4. Have an accountability buddy, someone close to you to whom you have to report

your progress.

5. Celebrate your success between milestones. Don't wait the goal to be finally completed.
6. Focus your thinking on new behaviors and thought patterns. You have to create new neural pathways in your brain to change habits.
7. Focus on the present. What's the one thing you can do today, right now, towards your goal?
8. Be mindful. Become physically, emotionally and mentally aware of your inner state as each external event happens, moment-by-moment, rather than living in the past or future.

And finally, don't take yourself so seriously. Have fun and [laugh](#) at yourself when you slip, but don't let the slip hold you back from working at your goal.

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