

Healthy Resolutions

Tips for Reaching Your New Year's Goals

Ah, here we are again—a new year. The ball has dropped; the toasts have been cheered, and the resolutions have been made...and broken. Same story, different year. Many of us make the same resolutions over and over—this year we'll lose weight, exercise more, eat better, stop smoking, drink less, quit caffeine, ...—only to find that we can't seem to achieve them. Why? And why did our neighbor succeed in losing 10 pounds last year or keep up with his/her daily walking program? Why? What's their motivation? These are questions often asked by the general public, as well as scientists and researchers; and although the answer probably isn't exactly the same for any two

people, there are some ideas that do seem to work for many.

This issue of *HealthHints* will take a look at practical steps we can take to help us increase our chances for success at keeping our healthy resolutions. Whether your resolutions start in January or June, these tips may be just what you need to help you achieve your goals for better health this year... and next.

Where to Start Begin with commitment & confidence

So where do we begin? Let's start with a definition:

"A New Year's Resolution is a commitment that an individual makes to a project or a habit, often a lifestyle change that is generally interpreted as advantageous."³

There are some key factors in this definition, the first of which is the word "**commitment.**" To be successful with your own resolutions, you have to have a strong initial commitment to make a change.⁴ Not thinking about making resolutions until the last minute, or reacting on New Year's Eve and making a resolution based on what's bothering you or is on



New Year's Resolutions: Facts, Figures, & Figuring It Out

Many New Year's resolutions are for health-related goals. Among the most often made resolutions are:

- increasing exercise;
- developing better eating habits; and
- stopping smoking, drinking, or using other drugs (including caffeine).

- ☑ 67% of people make 3 or more resolutions.
- ☑ 63% of people are keeping their resolutions after 2 months.
- ☑ 25% of New Year's resolutions will be abandoned in the first 15 weeks.
- ☑ The average number of times a New Year's resolution is made is 10.
- ☑ Those who manage to make a resolution last for 6 months or more have often tried 5 or 6 times before finally succeeding.^{1,2}

Don't lose heart ...

your mind at that moment⁴ doesn't allow you time to think through how you will proceed to keep your resolution. Making a change just because it's New Year's Day isn't enough to keep you motivated for long.⁵

- Are you motivated to make long-term lifestyle changes that require some sacrifice?
- Can you make this goal a priority, or are there major distractions in your life

How Long to a Habit?

Did you know that it only takes about 3 weeks—that's 21 days—to develop a habit? If you keep at it for 6 months, there's a good chance it will just become part of who you are—part of your personality and your life.^{2, 8}

The great thing is, you can make a resolution at any time (not just New Year's Eve or New Year's Day). Consider right now your new beginning, and assess whether or not you're ready to commit to a resolution. Consider this month your "processing" month—the time to consider your level of commitment and confidence in achieving your goal. Then plan and "go for it" next month.

Decide if you are truly ready and willing to make the effort to kick a bad habit or start a healthy one. **Confidence** in your ability to make your set behavior change is another key to making a successful change.⁴ Lasting change means being prepared to make sacrifices.⁵ Making resolutions on a whim sets you up to break your resolutions.⁴ You must think through what you want to change and, with confidence, commit to the long-term process it usually takes to achieve change.⁶

Ask yourself these questions to help identify your commitment and confidence level:

- currently that may prevent you from committing to your goal?
- Do you know how to change the behavior? Do you have the knowledge required or know where to find the information needed?
- Are you realistic about your goal?
- Do you have family and/or friends who will support you?
- Do you believe you can change your habits?
- Are you willing to change your habits?
- Do you have time to keep track of your progress?
- Are you willing to look past former setbacks and keep working to resolve barriers to reaching your goal?
- Do you view reaching your goal as a positive experience?
- Do you believe achieving your healthy goal is a lifelong commitment?⁷

If you can answer yes to these questions, you are likely ready

to make the necessary changes to meet your goal and maintain it. If you answered no to one or more of these questions, you may not be quite ready, and that's okay. Explore what's keeping your "no's" from being "yes's." For instance, maybe it is a simple matter of timing; maybe you need to resolve another problem in your life right now instead of this particular goal. Or maybe you simply need to learn more about how to achieve your goal so you can have a plan and confidence in your ability to follow it. If you don't know how to change your "no's" into "yes's," try talking to a doctor, dietician, or support group with the knowledge to help.⁷

The remainder of this newsletter has other ideas to help you increase your chances for success in keeping your resolutions.

Establishing Your Resolution

Choose one, be positive, gain knowledge

One of the mistakes many of us make in setting resolutions is making too many resolutions at once. If you want to stop smoking, lose weight, and reduce stress—that's great, but don't try to do it all at once. Here are some things to think about when resolving to change a behavior:

- **Choose one.** Choose one area of your health that you want to work on.⁹
- **Make it your own.** Make sure you choose a resolution that is within your control and that you—not your family members or friends—want to make. When you attain your goal, your



friends and family will benefit from your success as well.

- **Be realistic.** Be realistic about what you can and will do and in what timeframe. Consider your finances, schedule, and personal affairs.¹⁰
- **Be positive.** Frame your resolution positively. Don't frame your resolution as an absolute, saying "I will never do X again." It simply sets us up for failure.⁴ Think about what you can add to your life rather than what you will take away from it. For example, with a goal to lose weight, you need to reduce fats; however, instead of just saying you will eat lower fat foods, consider a goal of eating more fruit when you want a snack or an extra green vegetable at each dinner.



This way, every time you snack or sit down for a dinner-time meal, you can see it as an opportunity to add something to your life rather than

taking something away.¹

- **Avoid repeat resolutions.** Avoid repeating a previous resolution in the same way. Try a different technique.¹¹ If you resolved to stop smoking or chewing tobacco "cold turkey" last year but didn't, try resolving to get more information, support, join a stop smoking program, or

use a nicotine-fading method this year. Consider doing more activity when normally you would smoke, or spend time with friends or family who don't use tobacco. See the *HealthHints* newsletter "Tobacco Cessation" at http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/Health_Education_Rural_Outreach/Health_Hints/2005/spring05/tobacco_cessation_with_handouts.pdf for some ideas or motivation for quitting.



- **Gain knowledge.** Set a goal to gain knowledge. If you're not quite sure how to reach your goal, set a goal to explore your need to make a health-related change; get the facts; find out what action steps are necessary; and realistically assess the potential obstacles in your life to making the change. Use this information to write your new resolution, and develop a plan that's right for you.¹

Make a Plan

Be S.M.A.R.T.

Once you've chosen your goal and learned how to go about it, it's time to make a plan. Writing down your resolution and how you will attain it are key to success. A great way to do this is to use a S.M.A.R.T. — Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-based plan.¹²

Specific — Be specific.¹⁰ Saying "I want to get in shape" is pretty vague. If your goal is to exercise more, don't just say "I will exercise more." Say, I will take three 10 minute breaks to walk around the building at work 5 days a week. (Yes, exercise can be accumulated in this way. See the *HealthHints* newsletter "Workouts that Work for You" at http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/Health_Education_Rural_Outreach/Health_Hints/2006/jan06/workouts.pdf.) Also, write short-term goals on the way to achieving a longer-term goal. Setting several short-term goals gives you a greater chance of achieving long-term success.¹³

If your long-term goal is to lose 20 pounds, break that down into short-term goals, like losing 2 pounds in the next 2 weeks. Then specify how you will do that (e.g., eating a certain number of calories each day, adding fruits or vegetables to your diet, switching to 2% instead of whole milk, adding specific physical activities, etc.).

Measurable — Make sure your goal is measurable. For example, I will exercise 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week. Two days a week I will walk



Stanford Health and Lifestyle Assessment

Understanding your current health status a little better can help you identify goals for healthy behavior change. Take this free on-line assessment to see how your physical condition and your thoughts about your current health and behavior can lead you to new goals for better health: http://www.ymca.net/resources_for_families/resolutions_shala.html

A Recipe for Goals

Like a good recipe in the kitchen, a good recipe for goals is to:

- Take things one step at a time.
- Be precise.
- Make it measurable.
- Have a timeframe¹⁴...if you don't, you're likely to end up burned.

around the baseball field while my son practices; three days a week I will walk after work. Or, I'll wear a pedometer and measure my steps taken each day, increasing toward my set goal. For more information, see the *HealthHints* newsletter "Pedometers, Heart Rate Monitors...Motivational Tools" at: http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/Health_Education_Rural_Outreach/Health_Hints/2004/fall_2004/pedometers-with-handout.pdf. Keep a log of your activity. Whether your goal is to increase exercise or stop tobacco use, keeping track of your progress through a log or journal is a great strategy. Keeping track in writing helps you to see your successes and see the areas that need work.



Attainable — Be realistic, and be honest. Assess your strengths and weaknesses. If you want to do a triathlon, that's a terrific goal. But if you haven't moved from the couch after work for 3 months, it's a long-term goal. Start small and work toward your goal. Begin walking at short intervals, increasing to greater duration and intensity over time. Try using a walking plan or program like these to get you started and keep you motivated: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/walking/SM00060> http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/prevent/p_active/walk.htm <http://walkacrosstexas.tamu.edu/>.

Relevant — All goals toward being healthier are relevant; however, make sure they are appropriate for you. If you have a chronic health condition or other health concerns, talk with your doctor about what goals are best for you.

Time-based — A good resolution is time-bound. You need to have a timeframe to work within for short- and long-term goals. For example, I will research smoking cessation programs for the next 5 days. I will sign up for a support group by next Monday. I will begin

the nicotine-fading method on February 3rd. My long-term goal is to be completely quit by August 3rd.

Be specific and realistic in your goal-setting. Give yourself a timeframe to work within. Put it in writing on your calendar. Begin to work toward your goal, and keep track of your progress. And don't forget to celebrate your successes!

The following goal-setting worksheets can help you get started:

<http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/healthhints/2007jan/challenge.pdf>

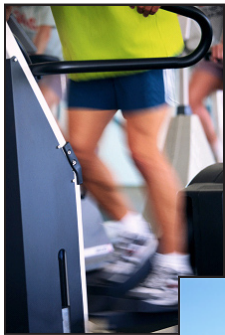
http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/growing_stronger/motivation/goalsetting_worksheet.pdf.



To view the references used in this newsletter, go to: <http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/healthhints/2007jan/ref.php>

Take the 1-3-5 Challenge 1 What, 3 Whys, 5 Hows

Do you need some motivation to get started with a healthy behavior change? Do you feel a bit overwhelmed at how to plan out steps toward a long-term goal? Try author and consultant Gary Ryan Blair's 1-3-5 system for setting and reaching goals.



"Think of one *what*, three *whys*, and five *hows*," he says.¹

"The *what* is the resolution."¹

"The *whys* are... the 'emotional fuel' behind your decision. If you resolve



to get more exercise, the *whys* may be to have more energy, to increase muscle tone, and to lose weight."¹

"The *hows* are the ways you'll

accomplish your task. It's here...that being specific and time-oriented are important."¹ Choosing five small steps to get you on your way to reaching your

goal is very doable and less overwhelming than planning your life from now until next year.

You may choose to lift weights at the gym for 30 minutes twice a week, take a step class twice a week, and walk for an hour one day a week. You may, however, take smaller steps — walk Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday at three 10-minute breaks during work, and go bicycling with your kids on Saturday morning for 30 minutes.



Whatever your goals, try the 1-3-5 system to get you motivated to try.

Remember, "change isn't something that happens in a single stroke; it's a process that develops over time...."² Use the worksheet on the next page to start your plan.

References:

1. Belanger, L (2006). Making – and keeping – new year's resolutions. Retrieved January 5, 2007. From <http://www.nubella.com/content/view/2615/67/>.
2. Health Day News (2006). Motivation key to keeping those get fit resolutions. Retrieved January 4, 2007. From <http://www.healthfinder.gov/news/newsstory.asp?docid=536520>.

My 1-3-5 Plan

WHAT

- 1. _____

WHY

- 1. _____

- 2. _____

- 3. _____

HOW

- 1. _____

- 2. _____

- 3. _____

- 4. _____

- 5. _____

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