

Tips for Sticking with Your New Year's Resolution – Or Getting Back on Track

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Every year half of all adults in the US make New Year's resolutions. Most make a commitment to improving their health: eating better, being more active, or losing weight, for example.

I like New Year's Resolutions. Even though these resolutions are often fueled by guilt over a long holiday season of too much food and too little activity, they still reflect our deepest hopes for better health and wellbeing. We really, really want to turn over a new leaf for the New Year.

Unfortunately, we make our new year's resolutions heading into winter, a season when night falls early, and the weather in most parts of the country makes outdoor exercise less enjoyable. Not a good combination, since it means fewer opportunities to be active, and more temptation to spend long evenings curled up in front of the television set, enjoying the shows and our favorite snacks.

Winter is a big reason most New Year's resolutions are sagging or sunk by the beginning of February. If you are struggling to maintain your motivation for your new year's resolution, read on...

First, take stock of what you are doing *right*. When we are trying to get (or stay) on track, we usually look for what is going wrong and try to fix it. That's a good thing to do, but looking *first* for what you are doing right is even better. After all, your goal is to do what you are doing right more often, so being clear about *what* you are doing right and *why* you got it right when you did can be a big help.

Take a moment to think of what you are doing right when it comes to your new year's resolution. Even if you have not done a thing since you made the resolution, you did one thing right: you made the resolution in the first place. Don't underestimate how important that is. Think about the moment you made your resolution. Why did you make it then? Try to remember exactly what you were thinking and feeling at that moment. People tend to make resolutions at moments of enlightenment and strong feeling. Recalling those thoughts and feelings can help maintain or rekindle your motivation.

Surround yourself with reminders of why you made your resolution. Write down the thoughts and feelings that motivate you. If continuing to enjoy your family motivates you, put up lots of pictures of them.

If you are like most people, you did more than just make a resolution – for at least a while, you stuck to it. That’s another thing you did right. If you are sticking to your resolution even part way, it’s a very good thing. Why are you sticking to your resolution? What do you get out of it? If you gave up on your resolution, why did you do it when you did? Keeping in mind *why* you are working hard to stay healthy and *what* you get out of it can help keep you afloat when you feel your motivation sinking.

Other things can also help you stick with your resolutions. **Let’s give your resolution a “check-up”**, to see where you might need help.

First, is your resolution realistic? You will never be able to stick with a resolution that is too ambitious. For example, resolving to start walking 6 miles every day is not realistic. Walking 6 miles might be realistic as a long-term goal, but most people would have to build up to that level unless they are already serious walkers. And walking every day is probably not realistic for anyone, given the facts of daily life. So a realistic resolution takes into account both where you are right now, and the facts of your life.

Your choice of activity has to be realistic as well. If you are like most people, you don’t enjoy being active, but at least pick an activity you can live with. Walking is a good choice for lots of reasons: it does a world of good for your physical and mental fitness, it can help control your weight, it doesn’t cost much, and most people can find a place to do it. But almost anything loses its charm if you do it too much, so consider “cross training” – having two or more activities, so you always have one to turn to when your main activity gets stale or you can’t do it. Don’t forget dancing. You can go out dancing with your partner, take a spin around the living room together, or even do it all by yourself.

Second, is it ambitious enough? Resolutions that are too ambitious are the first to be discarded, but resolutions that are not ambitious enough follow close behind. You have to stretch yourself some to get (and see) any benefits. If you don’t see progress when you do more, you aren’t likely to keep doing more. The latest research suggests that people who want to get the most benefit from activity should walk briskly, or something do similar, for about 45 minutes a day most days of the week. That’s quite a bit of exercise, and you may never reach that goal, but if you are doing much less, think about a stepped plan to get as close as you can. If you are walking 15 minutes twice a week now, for example, resolving to walk 15 minutes on a third day is a great step, but you might want to make a more ambitious long-term resolution as well.

Third, do you have a resolution relapse prevention plan? Even the best resolutions run into challenges. So having a resolution relapse prevention plan is very important. The first step in this plan is figuring out where you are most likely to slip from your resolution. You know yourself better than anyone else does, so you know where your motivation is most likely to sag. Now, what will you tell yourself when this happens? You will be feeling discouraged, so be prepared to tell yourself something reassuring that helps keep you together when it feels things are slipping away. What helps you

most at those moments is something only you know, but most people say it helps to remember what is going right, that everyone has rough times, and that even in rough times they can still make a choice to do the right thing.

The final piece of the resolution relapse prevention plan is people you can turn to when you need help. Think of family, friends, and health care providers you can count on when you need them, and be sure to call on them when you do.

Good luck sticking with your new year's resolutions, and any others you might make.