

How to Make and Keep Resolutions

Volume 2, Issue 2

February 2008

Psychology Month, Dufferin-Peel C.D.S.B.

Each year, many of us make New Years resolutions. We want to make changes that will improve our lives during the next year.

At the beginning of February, which is Psychology Month in Canada, many Canadians have found it tough to keep their resolutions and some may have already given up. Keeping resolutions can be difficult. Usually a resolution is about changing behavior for long term rather than short term gain such as exercising or losing weight. We can feel discouraged, guilty, and even defeated when a month's worth of effort yields slow or few results.

"Making New Years resolutions is easy" states Dr. Robert Vallerand, President of the Canadian Psychological Association. "It is keeping them over the long term that can be very hard. Psychological research suggests that there are ways to increase the chances we will be successful in changing our behavior."

Using our knowledge of the psychology of behavior, here are some suggestions on how to make and keep resolutions, or change habits and behavior more successfully.

1. Make your goals specific and measurable. Vague goals or resolutions are nearly impossible to keep or achieve.

a. A common resolution may be to exercise 'more'. Because 'more' is vague you can never know if you have achieved it.

b. It is better to resolve to use the treadmill in the basement 3 times per week for 20 minutes each time. Twenty minutes, 3 times per week is specific and gives you clear benchmarks for success.



2. Make your goals realistic. It is best to plan changes that are under your control and that you can reasonably achieve in the timeframe you have set for achieving them. The more you depend on others to meet your goals or set goals you cannot possibly achieve, the harder it will be to meet them.

a. Unrealistic: I want to quit smoking with my partner by Friday.

b. Realistic: I will eliminate one cigarette a week and I will help and support my partner in quitting smoking as well.

3. Take baby steps not giant leaps as changing behavior is tough. The best chance for success is to do it in stages or steps. The steps need to be easy to accomplish to guarantee success. If the steps are too big, you just increase the chance of frustration and failure.

a. Giant leaps: I am going to run a marathon in 6 months.

b. Baby steps: I am going to start running, starting with 1 kilometer three times a week and increasing by a half a kilometer every second week.

4. Keep a record of each time you do things that help you get to your goal. Reviewing your progress gives you realistic information about your success and can be a real boost. It also allows you to reassess your goals based on your progress and further increase your chances for success.

a. Memory is not accurate. Relying on memory will likely lead you to either over or underestimate your progress.

b. Recording is accurate and acts as a positive reinforcement each time you engage in your activity. It also lets you accurately track changes in your performance over time. This lets you adjust your goals up or down to increase your opportunity for success.

5. Don't be afraid to adjust your plans. First you make your best guess about how to change your behavior. If you find your plan is too tough or the steps are too big, make adjustments. Make it possible to achieve success, and then raise the bar...

a. No adjustment: If you are rigid and keep to an original plan which doesn't afford you success, you increase the chances you will burn out and give up.

b. Adjustments, either up or down, can increase interest, commitment and success.

6. Don't think that adjusting your plan is a failure, rather think of it as a smarter way to make progress. Companies adjust their plans based on experience. You should do the same. Feel good about being flexible.

7. Failure is not all bad as failure is a fact of life. Nobody is perfect, and if you find that you are not living up to your plan, don't give up! Adjust

the plan and get back at it as soon as possible. Research shows that many people are ultimately successful in changing their behavior when they stop and re-start, often many times over. The sooner you get back to it, the better.

8. Feedback and support from others can be very helpful. People you care about can give you praise and encouragement. This can help during the good and the bad times. Positive feedback helps and negative feedback hinder.

a. Negative feedback can be well intentioned by it can be harmful. It usually focuses on what you should do or what you have not done. If you hear words like should, didn't, couldn't, etc, you know it is negative feedback.

b. Positive feedback gives encouragement that supports what you are doing instead of what you have not done or should be doing.

9. Positive reinforcement is a powerful motivator. Positive reinforcement works best when it is easily attained, meaningful to you, frequent and not expensive. Reward yourself for sticking to your program. For example, if your plan is to ride a stationary bike for twenty minutes three times a week, reward yourself at the end of each week that you are successful.

10. Changing behavior takes time. In fact, to make your changes permanent, it can take several months or a couple of years. Be patient and keep at it.



11. Replacing old habits with new habits is hard. The new behaviors you want to turn into new habits must replace your old habits, which can be very strong. It takes time to reduce the strength of the old habit and to make the new behavior strong enough to replace it. As the old phrase says, old habits die hard. However, your new behavior will soon be your new habit.

12. When you think about changing behavior – whether it is your behavior, your children's behavior, or that of your spouse – all of these points can apply equally well! Pick specific, measurable, realistic goals, record progress, provide lots of positive feedback and encouragement, adjust plans if needed, provide rewards for success, remember old habits die hard, and above all – DON'T GIVE UP!

(Information courtesy of Canadian Psychological Association)

For more information about resolutions and changing behavior contact Debra Lean, Chief Psychologist by mail at: debra.lean@dpcdsb.org or by phone at (905) 890-0708, ext. 24334.

