

Making Resolutions Last

Some 50 million Americans make New Year's resolutions every year. Most of these relate to changing behavior, such as quitting smoking, eating better, or exercising. Only a very small percentage of these resolutions, however, survive long enough to see February. Much of the trouble resides in lack of planning. If you smoke, for example, and resolve to quit, you should carefully consider what you get out of smoking; whatever it is, you will miss it when you try to stop. Similarly, if you don't exercise, why not? If you don't like the feeling of exerting yourself, or don't like to sweat, or can't find the time, how do you expect that to change now that 2001 has rolled around?

If you are unhappy with your diet, perhaps because of your weight or concerns about risk for chronic illness, you may have resolved to change it for the better. But what will you be giving up? Why did you start eating the way you do in the first place? What difficulties, related to shopping, cooking, socializing, or simply enjoying your food are you likely to encounter as you attempt to follow through on your resolution?

These questions matter if your resolution is intended to be more than just an annual gesture. Behavior change is difficult. There is usually good reason—often many good reasons—why we choose to behave

the way we do. And when you try to change your behavior, all of those reasons will gang up on you and try to make you revert back to your old behavior. If you want to succeed, you have to be prepared for that challenge.

Resolutions are based on motivation, inspiration, and solidarity. A new start to the year inspires people to make a fresh start as well. But behavior is not determined only by motivation. Equally important is the familiarity of one behavior relative to another, and the difficulty involved in behavior change.

None of this is meant to be discouraging, just realistic. You will only benefit from your resolution(s) if you make it last. If you consider not only the reasons for a resolution, but the challenges involved, and plan accordingly, you improve your chances. If, for example, you resolve to lose weight by eating better and exercising, try to tally up the difficulties you'll encounter. If you plan to walk, where will you go when the weather is bad? If you use a treadmill, will you keep at it when you get bored? If you plan to swim, can you find the time? What time of day will you exercise? If you plan for the mornings, what will you do if you don't feel like getting up early? If you plan for after work, what if you're too hungry?



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Each of these challenges can be met. Perhaps you can use a treadmill or Nordic track when the weather is bad, walk outside when the weather is good, and do aerobics or swim at the Y in winter. You can either go to bed a bit earlier to make getting up earlier easier, or you can snack (on nutritious food) at work in the afternoon so you don't mind exercising after work. And so on.

Space here only allows for limited examples. The general point is this: if you want to have a healthier lifestyle, resolve not to make any more resolutions. Rather, consider both the reasons for behavior change, and the challenges, and do some careful planning, with help from your doctor as needed. With commitment and planning, your health will be off to a great start in 2001. Happy, healthy New Year!

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