



Making New Year's Resolutions More Meaningful and Lasting

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Opinion

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January can be a time when we think about making New Year's resolutions. This typically means attempting to make behavioral changes. It can feel challenging and anxiety-provoking to set goals. At the same time, setting goals makes us aware of the real possibility to make positive changes to our lives.

Most people who attempt to change their behavior or habits are not successful on the first try. Thoughts of making resolutions gives us the opportunity to think, both about the future and about the past year. What have been our disappointments and what were our achievements? If we have not succeeded the way we expected, we can become preoccupied with negative emotions and feel like a failure, certain that what we had wanted to achieve is impossible. That is called jumping to conclusions. These negative thoughts can ultimately limit our ability to see that there are opportunities out there in the world.

When a goal is not achieved, we can use this as an opportunity to refocus our thoughts. Start small, think of what you can specifically do immediately, to make a change. Maybe the most you can do now is to take a deep inhalation and stay in the present. Then take a deep exhalation. Continue taking deep breaths. This will allow you to calm down. This process can help you to step away from a stressful situation and organize your thoughts. Then you can ask yourself... how your body is feeling. Are your muscles feeling less tense. Specifically pay attention to the muscles in your neck, shoulders and back. Do your muscles ache? You might recall that, in the past you would feel looser after you exercised. That is a positive thought that can give you back some control over your life. The idea is not to stifle or deny difficult emotions or thoughts, like anger or frustration.

Then you can make the conscious choice of interrupting your negative emotions or feedback loops. You can thoughtfully make other choices that create different possible results.

This can be regarded as the Contemplation Phase. In this stage you begin to reflect upon and weigh the pros and cons of various possibilities. You might predict a result. These predictions might be premature. Unexpected situations might show up. With this awareness you can tweak your predictions and goals. You can set about changing your behavior, in incremental ways.

This next phase involves determination. In this phase, you can make a conscious decision to make a change. Make it specific. Put it into words. For example, what does the specific plan you contemplate look like. Make it convenient and manageable. For example you have access to a gym, nearby. You resolve that you will go to the gym on Monday mornings. You realize that you can work out for 45 minutes. Then after you work out, think about how you feel. Put it into words. You feel more energetic and your body feels more relaxed. You are smiling. Ask yourself, do you want to feel that positive sensation again. How will you put that into practice? You can decide to go to the gym again on Wednesday morning. Bring to mind, how you are feeling before the work-out? Again put that feeling, into words. You are feeling tired and tense. After your workout, how do you feel. Again you are feeling more energetic and more relaxed. Then satisfied with these results, you are in the Determination Phase, determined to put these behaviors into an action. This can help you focus on what is important to you and in that way prioritize how you use your time.

The next step is to formulate an action plan. For example, on Monday and Wednesday mornings you will go to the gym. You have decided to make a resolution that has realistically considered your individual situation and goals. You have put a specific plan in place to help you stay on track. You are taking action to bring about a positive lifestyle change.

You might regress or relapse into a negative behavior

pattern as time passes. Relapse is part of the behavior change process. As we all know, life happens. It may take several attempts before the lifestyle change becomes sustained over the long haul. The key is to set achievable, realistic goals and to have a plan in place to keep you on track. And remember to be kind to yourself. Allow for flexibility and adjustments when necessary.

