

2013 Resolutions: How to Make Them Last

Written by Dr. Michael Yasinski M.D.

Psychiatrist Michael Yasinski M.D. discusses the tools needed to make New Year's resolutions successful.



As we put the holidays behind us, many of us turn to the upcoming New Year's celebration to profess our resolutions to change. Often due to lofty goals and an attitude of self-defeat, people can fall short of success. What keeps people achieving their goals and what can be done to maximize the chance of success?

First, here is an idea of the most common resolutions which will likely resonate with almost everyone: Starting to exercise and lose weight; changing our diet and reducing the consumption of alcohol, caffeine and other drugs; or quitting smoking. All of these are tremendously great life-changes to make but are they simply too difficult to achieve?

Clearly, people achieve these changes all the time, but studies do show that 75 percent of people fail to meet their goal. So, from a psychological perspective, it might be interesting to ask what exactly determines how many goals people set and how successful they are. Research finds that people who believe that self-control is something dynamic, changing and unlimited (e.g., "I can stop smoking, all I have to do is put my mind to it. I can also change my eating and be a better person, it just takes willpower") tend to be significantly more successful compared to people who have a more limited scope of self-control.

People who believe that we all are born with a limited, set amount of self-control that one cannot change (e.g., "I can't help myself from eating all this chocolate—I inherited the 'chocolate gene' from my mom!") and who also have little belief in their own capabilities to carry out their own goals (they have what psychologists refer to as "low self-efficacy") are much less successful.

Although somewhat obvious, the more you believe in your own capabilities the more likely you will succeed. An important aspect of this is setting yourself up for success. To do so, one must maintain a positive attitude, gather all of the necessary tools and help that is needed to achieve your goals (if you want to quit smoking, do you really have any idea how to do so?), and set goals with a group of well-respected friends, which taps into the powerful tool of accountability. For example, weight loss among competitive friends works extremely well.

Last, if you don't want to change, agree to change for someone else or only make a half-hearted attempt, don't be surprised by your amazing lack of success.

THREE TIPS TO SUCCEED AT ACHIEVING YOUR NEW YEAR'S GOALS:

Have a strong initial commitment to make a change; choose a goal that is important to you and not someone else.

Make sure you set yourself up for success with achievable goals as well as gather all the appropriate tools or information necessary to achieve the goals.

Tell people you respect or admire. Accountability is key.

Have a topic of discussion for Dr. Yasinski:

E-mail him at msy@yasinskipsychiatry.com.