



# Keeping New Year's Resolutions

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

With New Year's Day just around the corner, many of us are planning our New Year's resolutions. We'll promise to change something in our lives—to break a bad habit or to do something we've been putting off.

We will plan to start exercising, to go on a diet, to quit smoking or drinking, to finish some project around the house such as cleaning the basement, or to get along better with someone we love.

But what chance do we have at keeping our resolutions? Research shows that somewhere between 20% and 46% of American adults who make New Year's resolutions are able to keep them.

So if you make a resolution this year, how can you be successful at keeping it? Here are some proven methods that can help...

## **Start at the Beginning**

When making a New Year's resolution, we recognize that we have not been living up to our expectations this year and we decide to make an improvement in the coming year. There are four parts to making a resolution:

- 1) We reflect on our lives and see a problem. ("I've been eating too many sweets" or "I'm still smoking" or "I haven't cleaned that basement yet.")
- 2) We compare ourselves to some standard. ("I'm eating more sweets than most people.")
- 3) We find that we're not measuring up to this standard and that there are consequences we don't want. ("I've been gaining too much weight.")
- 4) We make a resolution to change. ("I'll stop eating so many sweets.")

## **Be Specific**

In order to succeed with a resolution, we need to phrase it in the right way. Just making a general statement will not work. We need to make the resolution specific and base it on something we can measure in our behavior. ("I want to lose 5 pounds in the next three months and I'll do it by cutting out candy snacks between meals.") If we resolve to clean the basement, it helps to set a date for completing the task.

Resolutions also reflect how hard we want to work. For each resolution we make, we need to make a decision. Do we want to lose 5 pounds or 15? Do we want to have the basement clean by the end of February or the end of June?

Also beware of extremes. Resolutions like, "I'm not going to eat any sweets ever again," may collapse by the middle of January, as it may prove too unrealistic. On the other hand, with

addictions for example, expecting the extreme is the only plan that does work. When we say, “I’m quitting smoking,” we need to stay away from cigarettes completely. If we have one, usually that brings the addiction back.

## **Making a Commitment**

In order to keep a resolution, you will need to make a strong commitment to yourself to stay with it. Your commitment will be like a solemn vow or promise. Here are four ways to strengthen your commitment:

- 1) Think of the benefits you’ll gain. For example, when planning to exercise more, make a list of how your new exercise program will help you. (“I’ll lose weight. I’ll enjoy better health. I’ll reduce my chances of heart disease. I’ll feel calmer. I’ll have more energy.”) Keep these benefits in mind all the time. They’ll help to motivate you.
- 2) Write your resolution. This can take the form of a contract. (“I promise to swim laps at the indoor pool for a half hour a day, four days a week. I will treat this contract as a vow to myself.”) Then date it and sign it. You can have a witness sign it too if you like. Then post this in a prominent place.
- 3) Read your resolution every day and repeat it to yourself a few times. Motivational experts recommend that you say it out loud.
- 4) Find people who can help. Let family members and friends know about your resolution. Tell only those who will be supportive. Also you may need professional help, such as a physical fitness trainer, a counselor to help with relationship issues or with drug and alcohol addictions, a dietician, or family doctor. Or you may improve through self-help books.

## **State What You Need to Do**

To make a lasting change, you need a plan. Just saying, “I’ll quit smoking,” won’t work. Set a goal. Review it daily. Pick a program. Measure your success. Track your progress.

Your goal could be to quit smoking. Your program could be the “Stop Smoking Program” sponsored by the Cecil County Health Department. You can measure your success as each day without a cigarette and your progress will be the accumulated number of days you’ve remained a non-smoker.

But it can be hard to break a habit. Sometimes we act automatically. We eat that donut in the break room before we even realize we’ve done so. That’s why it helps to focus on action steps. Each day, plan how you will get through each event. (“This morning, I will not eat any donuts in the break room.”)

Also, make your plan non-negotiable. If you have planned to get up a half-hour early, at 6 am, to exercise, you need to pop out of bed when that alarm rings, no ifs, ands, or buts.

Finally, reward yourself for success. Give yourself credit for keeping your resolution. And treat yourself for good behavior. Just remember to choose a safe treat, one that doesn’t break your resolution.

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