



Reprinted with permission from REMEDYLife.com. © 2009 MediZine, LLC. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited.

Making New Year's Resolutions

By Jonathan Denby and Natasha Persaud
Winter 2008

Making resolutions at the beginning of each new year has become a time-honored tradition. But when it comes to reaching your goals, some strategies are more helpful than others. Here, Diane Costigan, M.A., a certified life coach and consultant, explains how to increase your chances of success:

Why do people make New Year's resolutions?

"I think it's the whole idea of starting with a clean slate. People want to grow, and the start of a new year is a natural juncture to think about doing precisely that."

What are some common resolutions that people make? What are some that they ought to make?

"Resolutions run the gamut from achieving a better level of health or fitness to learning a new skill or hobby to striving for a better work/life balance," says Costigan.

"After the holiday excess, many people are looking to slim down, get fit and nix bad habits. Common health themes include losing weight, eating more nutritiously, starting an exercise routine, quitting smoking and drinking less.

"With the current economic downturn and financial strain, a lot of people will be looking in 2009 to find more ways to de-stress and relax, such as taking more time to engage in activities they enjoy.

"You choose the resolutions you want to make," says Costigan. "I think people are pretty much in tune with what they need. The trick is following through on whatever resolutions you make."

Is there a right – and wrong – way to plan your resolution?

Be specific. "What is it that you want to accomplish, and by when? Instead of just saying 'I want to lose weight,' say 'I want to lose 15 pounds by the first day of summer.' If you want to exercise more, say, 'I want to be able to run a mile in 10 minutes.'"

Have a strategy. "Block out time on a calendar or your planner each week for your goal. If you want to get fit, schedule time to go to the gym or to meet a buddy for a run. If you desire to eat more nutritiously, make time to visit your local farmers' market or a natural foods store, and plan your meals in advance."

“Record your progress each week in a planner or calendar and note areas where you haven’t been doing so well. That way, you can find ways to steer yourself back in the right direction. Frequent evaluation is key to helping you stay on track and to keeping your goal top of mind. You may need to delegate some responsibilities or hire a babysitter or house-cleaner to find time for your goal.”

Enlist a family member or friend to help you toward your goal. “Pick someone who is already performing well in that area or someone who has the same resolution. If you want to eat better, for example, choose the friend who brings healthy snacks to work, not the one who loves junk food. If you want to get fit, buddy up with someone in your aerobics class.”

“You want your resolution to become part of your way of living. That involves more than just adding it to your routine; It’s about believing your goal is important and continuing to remind yourself of its personal value to you to increase your chances of success.”

What if I don’t see results right away?

“There’s always a bit of a blind-faith period, particularly with diet and exercise resolutions, where you just have to just stick with the program before you begin to see results. Even if you cut calories from your diet, for example, you may not see a difference on the scale right away. Often, those first few weeks or months are the hardest. Be patient with yourself. It takes about 28 days to work yourself out of a bad habit and another 28 days to adopt a good one. It helps to remind yourself of why you made the resolution in the first place – what does it mean to you to achieve that goal? Let those reasons encourage you to stay the course.”

What should I do when I’m tempted to cheat, say, by skipping the gym, having a cigarette or eating a piece of chocolate cake?

Costigan gives her clients a little tool she calls “S.N.A.P. out of it.” Each letter stands for an action step:

Step one: Stop. Realize you’re in a moment of choice. You can decide to further your goal or to work against it.

Step two: Name the choice you’re making. Say, ‘I have a choice of eating a piece of cake or not eating a piece of cake.’ Speaking out loud wakens your rational side, taking away the emotional impulse to just eat it.

Step three: Acknowledge your goal. Tell yourself, ‘If I eat this piece of cake, it may hinder my efforts to lose weight.’ “In essence,” says Costigan, “you’re giving yourself a pep-talk.”

Step four: Plan your next steps. Make a decision to either eat the cake or to not eat it. You may decide to have a small slice and to work out for an hour later in the day. Or, you may decide not to eat the cake and to do something else pleasurable instead, such as call a friend or treat yourself to something you want.

What causes a person to fail?

People can struggle for many reasons, says Costigan. Here are some common pitfalls:

Problem: Too many resolutions. “Being ambitious can be good, but there is a fine line between being ambitious and having unrealistic expectations and goals.”

Solution: “Stick to making just one or two resolutions and really commit to doing the work required to accomplish them.”

Problem: You made unrealistic goals. “Resolving to lose 100 pounds in a year, for example, is an unrealistic goal – and perhaps even unhealthy. It’s easy to miss the mark and to feel defeated.”

Solution: “Decide on a change that is manageable and sustainable, and celebrate the small wins along the way.”

Problem: Not following up. “One of the primary reasons for failure is that people make resolutions on January 1st, and then never follow through with them. The goal gets put in a box on the shelf. It’s easy to do with all the pressures we have at work and at home.”

Solution: “Make sure you take steps toward your goal each week by putting them on your ‘to do’ list. In addition, check in with yourself once a week to evaluate how you are doing. You need to hold yourself accountable to doing the work you said was important to you.”

Problem: Lack of motivation. “We’re good at talking ourselves out of things, but we need to be better at talking ourselves into things,” says Costigan.

Solution: Ask yourself, “why do I really want to make the change,” “What value is that going to add to my life,” or “what is the cost going to be if I don’t attain that goal?” Then rehearse that reason to yourself and others.

“The more you can say your resolution the more accountable you are to it,” says Costigan. “To motivate yourself to quit smoking, for example, you may say, ‘I want to live long enough to see my kids grow up.’ It’s the same principle if what you want is simply for vanity. Say ‘In six months, I want to lose enough weight to fit into my favorite outfit that is one size too small.’ Most of us are motivated by either pleasure or by pain.

“It helps to act as if you already are that thing you want,” she adds. “Visualization is very powerful, so picture yourself doing the things you want to do.”

Problem: Failure to work with strengths. “If you’re a late riser, it doesn’t make sense to resolve to get up every morning at the crack of dawn to jog,” notes Costigan. “It’s probably better to jog in the afternoon or evening.”

Solution: “Once you’ve set your resolution, think about what can get in the way. Then go immediately to what you know you’re good at and see how that can help you overcome those obstacles. Are you organized but not disciplined? Think about how your organizational skills can help you be more disciplined.”

Problem: Handling setbacks poorly. “Setbacks are bound to happen,” says Costigan. “Anytime you try something new, you’re not going to be at 100 percent right out of the gate.”

Solution: “When you do have a setback, just sit down for a minute and evaluate what happened. Ask yourself: ‘Why did I fall off the wagon, and what do I need to do to get back on?’ You might feel disappointed initially, but don’t let minor issues stop you from moving forward.”

How can a professional help?

“If you think you could use extra help, bring in an appropriate professional, such as a personal trainer, a nutritionist, a life coach or a therapist,” suggests Costigan. “They’re experts in what they do and can offer valuable advice and support. They’re also people to whom you’ll be accountable, which can spur you to keep working towards your goal.

“Your trainer can’t do the work for you, but he or she is a valuable resource to help you reach your goal. For example, last year, I worked with a holistic health counselor on my resolution to maximize my energy. The counselor helped me choose foods and a style of eating that increased my energy level. It was helpful to have an expert guide me through the process.”

How do you define success?

“Success can begin on day one when you name your goal and take your first steps in earnest,” says Costigan. “Afterwards, I recommend having small weekly or monthly goals, and really celebrating those wins along the way. If you want to lose 30 pounds, for example, and have lost 2 pounds in the last two weeks, sit down for a minute and appreciate the feeling of having accomplished that. That’s a feeling you can – and should – get addicted to, to keep you moving forward. If you reach your goal by the end of the year, that’s icing on the cake.”

Diane Costigan, M.A., is a certified life coach and consultant.