

The Resolution Solution

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Having a tough time sticking to your New Year's resolutions? You are not alone – which is why advice columnists are so eager to offer tips for resolution-keeping success. Much of what they suggest is both practical and useful: keep goals simple, specific, and realistic, chart progress, reward yourself, and enlist social support. Given that these are all excellent suggestions, why aren't we all, non-smokers, non-drinkers, healthy eaters, non-procrastinators, and physically fit?

I began to wonder whether there was any serious research on the topic of New Year's resolutions, something that goes beyond recommended behaviors, and actually addresses the psychology behind our resolution-keeping efforts. What I discovered was that all studies of resolution success and failure deliver the same message: those who keep their resolutions are not only ready to commit to change, they also use completely different resolution-keeping strategies from the ones who are less successful. Let's have a look at the research.

In their 1989 study of the self-change attempts of 200 New Yorkers, Norcross, Ratzin, and Payne found that although only 19 percent kept their resolutions at the end of two years, success or failure was unrelated to gender, age, or type of resolution. What they did find, however, was that the 19 percent who stuck to their resolutions were committed, had a sense of their own self-efficacy (i.e., the belief that one *can* initiate and maintain change), and used active and positive strategies such as: 1) positive thinking ("I can do it" affirmations), 2.) rewarding themselves for meeting goals, 3) avoiding environments that encourage relapse (i.e., not meeting other smokers for coffee), and 4) adopting a gradual reduction ("fading") rather than abstinence ("cold turkey") approach. Conversely, those who failed to keep their resolutions (the other 81 percent) tended to engage in wishful thinking, minimizing the problem, or self-blame and criticism.

More recent studies (see Norcross, Mrykalo, and Blagys, 2002) have supported these findings: successful resolution-keepers adopt positive, active strategies (commitment, rewards, etc.), whereas those who abandon their resolutions tend to use a combination of passive (wishful thinking) and punitive (self-blame) strategies. It also appears that the single best predictor of New Year's resolution success is a combination of Readiness to Change and Commitment, such that being ready to commit to change makes a person *ten times* more likely to succeed than someone who is not yet ready to take action. Remember that the next time you make a resolution.

But that's not the whole picture – and here's the part that usually doesn't get addressed in advice columns: although readiness to change, commitment, and positive, active strategies promote resolution-keeping success, it is the ability to accept the inevitability of relapse that appears to be the most powerful factor in *maintaining* resolutions. And this, I believe, is why most people give up.

By way of example, let's say that after having resolved to go on a diet, you experience a lapse in will-power and eat a cookie. If you treat it as a minor slip and simply resume the diet, you're fine. But if you take your cookie indiscretion as a sign that you are hopeless, then give up and eat half the box, you have fallen prey to the Abstinence Violation Effect: the demoralizing cascade of negative self-talk that effectively torpedoes most resolutions. There is no shortage of research to back this up: in the 1989 Norcross study, 71 percent of those who kept their resolutions described slips as a learning experience that reminded them that they were making a conscious effort to succeed, which in turn provided protection against the self-criticism and the Abstinence Violation Effect.

If relapses are the norm, then how do we know when we have succeeded? In a later study, Miller and Marlatt (1998) found that successful participants viewed resolution-keeping as a *process* rather than a one-time effort, and noted (somewhat encouragingly) that even among those who successfully kept their resolutions, only 40% did so on their first attempt, and the remainder made up to six attempts before succeeding!

What can we learn from the research? It appears that resolution-keeping success appears to depend on three factors: readiness to commit to change, positive/active strategies, and the ability to frame setbacks in a positive light. However, it is perhaps the third factor that deserves the most attention. Many people mistakenly assume that self-criticism is an effective motivator, and in doing so, undermine their resolution-keeping attempts. Perhaps the best way we can help ourselves achieve our resolutions is to remember that although will-power and persistence are important, being flexible, treating ourselves with kindness, and accepting the occasional relapse are key factors in maintaining long-term change. To paraphrase Miller and Marlatt (1998), the golden rule for dealing with setbacks is: take credit for your successes, do not blame yourself for (inevitable) slips or relapses, and, view relapses as an opportunity to identify and overcome barriers to success.

For a quick reference guide to adopting and keeping resolutions email Dr. Estrin for a free copy of the Resolution Success Checklist at: drestrin@shaw.ca