

## Everything You Need to Know About New Year's Resolutions by Carolyn Gregoire

Statistically speaking, new year's resolutions are a losing game. A whopping 92 percent of people who set resolutions don't succeed, according to University of Scranton research.

Still, that doesn't mean that the start of a new year isn't a good time to commit to working towards any goals or self-improvement projects that you've put on the back burner.

Succeeding with your resolutions may simply be a matter of being smarter about them. If you are going to set some goals this year, maximize your chances of success by following some tried-and-true, science-backed guidelines.

Here are six psychology-based insights to help you make better resolutions -- and to actually keep them.

### 1. Ask, don't tell.

A recent study published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* examined the "question behavior effect" as it applies to new year's resolutions. They found that when people were asking a question about a new habit they'd like to adopt -- such as, "Will you start meditating?" or "Will you run every morning?" -- those people were 14 percent more likely to follow through on that behavior.

To apply this insight, write down your resolutions in question form, or leave a post-it note with a question about your habit on the fridge or the bathroom mirror. You can also try recruiting a friend or family member to ask you about your resolutions.

### 2. Stop to consider any potential obstacles.

Many of us are good at creating a vision of how we'd like to improve ourselves. What we're less good at is anticipating the obstacles that we'll inevitably face in the pursuit of our goals, according to New York University psychologist Gabrielle Oettingen.

Oettingen's research has shown that mental contrasting -- a technique for goal attainment in which you contrast a desired future outcome with challenges that you currently face and may one day encounter in the pursuit of that goal -- can help make resolutions stick.

"What we've found, in the many studies we've done, is that mental contrasting could help a lot," Oettingen told *The Huffington Post*. "It means that I can take

these positive fantasies and then shift gears and say, "What holds me back from meeting these positive fantasies? What is it in me that prevents this?"

Be sure to consider potential obstacles that could get in the way when forming a resolution.

### 3. Get intrinsically motivated.

Why do you want to break or make a habit? What is it about the goal you've set for yourself that makes it so important to you? When you start a self-improvement project, it's important to make sure you're doing it for the right reasons.

A study published in January in the Journal of Clinical Psychology finds that one of the best predictors of whether you'll achieve a goal is your motivation.

"Think about your reasons for setting your goal," said Emily Mailey, assistant professor of kinesiology at Kansas State University and one of the study's authors, in a statement. "Internal motivators, such as wanting to feel better or have more energy, are the ones that are more sustainable because they align with more people's personal goals and values and don't make working out feel like a chore. If you are motivated by these internal motivators, then you can focus on these immediate positive benefits of exercise, rather than the long-term goal of losing weight."

### 4. Make your resolution realistic.

It's easy to get caught up in sweeping resolutions, such as to lose 50 pounds or go jogging every morning. But research suggests that creating more moderate and realistic plans is a better way to ensure that you make actual progress.

So, take your loftiest goals and try cutting them in half. For instance, try going to the gym three days a week instead of six. You'll be more likely to keep the habit going and build confidence in your ability to create change.

"Setting small, attainable goals ... can help you reach whatever it is you strive for," psychologist Lynn Bufka said in an American Psychological Association press release. "Remember, it is not the extent of the change that matters, but rather the act of recognizing that lifestyle change is important and working toward it, one step at a time."

### 5. Keep your resolutions to yourself.

If you want to succeed, try not to shout your goals from the rooftops. A 2009 study that appeared in the journal Psychological Science found that people who announce their resolutions to friends and family are less likely to achieve them.

When you experience someone else's approval, it gives you a "premature sense of completeness." So you already start to enjoy the desired outcome in your mind.

### 6. Put it in your calendar.

Research has suggested that the key to making a habit stick may be to make it automatic, which you can easily do by creating a specific time slot for the activity every day or however often you plan to do it.

In a study published in the journal *Health Psychology*, researchers gave participants floss and told them they needed to floss more, as they showed them how to use it. At a follow-up, the researchers found that those who made a plan for when and where they would floss were more successful in adopting the habit than those who didn't.

But don't be too rigid with your schedule and your expectations for yourself -- it could make you more likely to give up when you slip just once or twice.