

3 Resolutions For a Happier Year by Christine Carter

You want to lose weight. Get out of debt. Stop smoking. Eat more kale. Call your grandma more often.

I do understand why people don't like New Year's resolutions: They can be a source of failure, year after year. Folks often pick resolutions that are inherently unrewarding, that necessitate relentless hard work, or that remind them of their mortality in a way that makes them feel small instead of grateful.

I know because I've made all of those mistakes. But now? I love New Year's resolutions. I use them to transform myself in small increments, taking turtle steps toward new habits. I begin slowly around the winter solstice, and inch myself toward a newer, better self. By spring, my new habits have taken hold, and the green leaves of growth unfurl.

Over the years I've learned a lot of tricks for successfully keeping my resolutions. And in the last three years, the science around willpower and habits has made great advancements, which helps a lot.

The first and most important factor in keeping your resolutions is to make the right resolution. Make the wrong one and you won't keep it; you'll just add another habit to the "fail" list.

This year, pick just one resolution that research shows will make you happier. Here are three of my favorites:

1. Spend more time with friends. Study after study shows that we tend to be happier when we feel connected to our nearest and dearest, when we feel like we are a part of a group or a clan. Even introverts don't like to feel lonely; this may seem like the science of the blazingly obvious, but it bears repeating. Do you frequently feel isolated or lonely? Make a resolution to routinely reach out to others.

Not sure how, or feel too busy? Join or start a group that meets regularly—maybe on the first Monday of the month, or every Friday at lunch. Some of my closest friends have come from book clubs, church groups, and standing family dinners. When we routinize our friendships, we remove the hassle of scheduling, and increase the odds that we'll actually spend time with people we love or want to get to know better.

2. Everyday, find a way to give something to somebody. My favorite happiness booster is to give thanks: to a higher power for the abundance that surrounds me; to my dad for taking my kids to ice cream; to my main squeeze for all the ways he supports my work.

Equally good is to give something else—a helping hand, a compliment, a much needed \$5 bill—even if it is just a tiny act of kindness. In a world that is more focused on getting than giving, a New Year’s resolution to do one kind thing each day, or to give thanks in one small way, is a pretty radical act. When we make giving a habit, we make gratitude and kindness central themes in our lives. In so doing, we transform our lives with joy.

3. Get more sleep and exercise. I know, that’s not one resolution, it’s two, but the science around these physical happiness boosters is pretty compelling. Studies are clear: You’ll be less stressed, less sick, and less grouchy in the New Year if you get more shut-eye. Try increasing your sleep 10 minutes a night for a week, and then another 10 the next week, and so on until you are regularly getting your eight hours.

If you aren’t active, you want to lose a few pounds, or you frequently feel a bit depressed, try adding more activity into your life in a way that feels fun or luxurious. I like to hike with my friend Jen and her ecstatically joyful dog Lou. It takes a couple hours out of my day (that’s the luxurious part, since I’m so strapped for time) but it leaves me feeling as bright and happy as Lou. On days when I don’t have time for a hike, I walk on a treadmill while watching Modern Family. This is luxurious and fun because I don’t watch TV at any other time.

It is miraculous to me that people can change themselves simply because they want to. New Year’s resolutions are an amazing act of creation, an art form where the canvas is the self.