

The 12 month resolution

Written by Brianna Larson
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The start of the New Year is often the perfect time to turn a new page in your life, which is why so many people make New Year's resolutions. Unfortunately, as the new year fans the flame of change, there will soon be only embers of resolve as months pass. So, why do our resolutions fail?

Researchers have looked at success rates of peoples' resolutions: the first two weeks usually go along beautifully, but by February, people are backsliding and by the following December, most people are back where they started, often even further behind.

People make resolutions as a way of motivating themselves. However, if people aren't ready to change their habits, particularly bad habits, that can account for the high failure rate that is associated with resolutions as time passes. The success rate of resolutions also diminish due to unrealistic goals and expectations that are out of alignment with a person's internal view of themselves. They may think that if they lose weight, reduce debts, or exercise more, their entire life will change. Unfortunately, when it doesn't many people get discouraged and revert to old behaviors.

It turns out, that the best way to keep a resolution may be to practice the skills and thought-processes needed to employ before trying. That's the unavoidable conclusion of a study in the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, which showed that women who spent eight weeks practicing weight maintenance before starting their diets lost the same amount of weight as women who simply started dieting first.

What is more important, though, the so-called "Maintenance First" dieters were far more successful at keeping their weight off over the course of year, gaining only three pounds on average versus seven pounds for "Weight Loss First" dieters. In particular, the study was designed so that half the participants learned a set of what the researchers call "stability skills," a toolkit of habits and behaviors. These included climbing on the scale daily so they could experience the natural fluctuations of body weight (the better to deal with disappointment), searching out low-fat or low-calorie foods that taste as good as high-fat or high-calorie options; treating themselves every once in a while to small amounts of tasty high-fat or high-calorie foods; purposefully losing a few pounds before a vacation or major holiday to minimize their effects; and eating a little more when reaching the lower limit of the personalized 5-pound range.

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In other words, rather than starting to diet immediately—which invariably requires a difficult combination of behavior changes, deprivations, focus and willpower—the Maintenance First dieters tackled all four challenges without the added burden of having to lose weight. They got good at the daily business of dieting before they tried to lose weight. That resulted in a greater ability down the line to keep their lost pounds from returning.

How to make your resolution last longer than 2 weeks:

- Focus on one simple and concrete resolution, rather several.
- Set realistic, specific goals. Losing weight is not a specific goal. Losing 10 pounds in 50 days is a better goal.
- Take small steps. Many people quit because the goal is too big.
- Have an accountability partner.
- Celebrate your success between milestones. Don't wait the goal to be finally completed.
- Focus your thinking on new behaviors You have to create new neural pathways in your brain to change habits.
- Focus on the present. What can you do right now?

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