

How are Those New Year's Resolutions Coming?

Change is hard for a lot of reasons but it is attainable with the the right approach.

by Erin Wiley
Community Contributor



Licensed counselor Erin Wiley.
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"This year I will lose those last 15 pounds!" "I promise to be a better spouse and parent" "2013 is the year I am finally going to get organized!" "I will earn a promotion before the year's end!"

So, my friends ... how are those New Year's resolutions coming? "Not so great," you say? Well, take comfort in knowing that you are part of the majority: researchers say at least 50 percent of those who set resolutions at the

beginning of the year will fail before February is even over. Even more sobering, some research suggests that only 8 percent of people still are going strong with their resolutions by March. What is it that makes resolutions so hard to stick to? What can we do to increase our chances for successfully reaching our goals and achieving self-improvement (regardless of the time of year)?

The answer lies in the roots of human behavior: understanding the real reason why people change. Real life change happens when the pain of staying the same is worse than the pain of change. In a word: consequences. Painful, negative consequences push us toward change.

Let's look at this example: "If I don't lose 50 pounds in the next two months, my doctor says I will have to start injecting myself daily with insulin and may lose my leg." Dramatic? Yes. But doesn't that sound like a real reason to change? Another example from my time working in a rehab facility: "If I get caught using heroin one more time, I will lose my children to the foster care system forever."

The problem for so many of us is that if we don't get promoted, lose 10 pounds or become a better spouse, nothing happens. There is no negative consequence for failure: only staying the same (which usually feels quite comfortable). One clever idea involves the potential loss of something of value to you. If you have people close to you, at work or in your family, who also want to achieve a specific goal, you can participate in a money pool. If you achieve your goal by the year's end, you get your money back. If you don't, you lose your money to be split evenly between the group members. There is even a web-

site (stickK.com) that will help you set your goal, hold some of your hard-earned bucks as ransom and then give away your money to a friend, enemy, charity or "anti-charity" — a charity whose mission you disagree with — if you miss the mark by your deadline, in order to help you have something important at stake if you don't reach your goal.

Another problem with humans and change is that we tend to aim for too much change too quickly. "I'm going to eat only healthy foods and getting to the gym five times a week for no less than two hours per workout!"

The problem with those kinds of goals is that we can fail too easily because the bar is set so high. With failure comes the feeling of defeat, which often leads to people giving up completely, sometimes even convincing themselves that the results of the change wouldn't have been that great in the first place. The answer to overly ambitious goal-setting is to break down your end goal into smaller, more manageable pieces. If you want to become a healthier eater, perhaps resolve to eat a healthy breakfast everyday until it becomes a lifestyle change. Then you can work on lunch and dinner. Or aim for two, 20-minute workouts per week. Once that is a consistent part of your routine, add another day or lengthen your time at the gym.

The idea that it takes 30 days to create a habit has recently been proven false; more recent research suggests it actually takes 66 days. So remember what we learned from the tortoise, "Slow and steady wins the race!"

The best way to set goals that work is to use the SMART acronym of appropriate goal-setting. Make your goals specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time-bound. For example, the goal "to be a better spouse and parent" is too vague and doesn't have any quantitative markers to define whether or not you've actually achieved it. Converting that goal to a SMART goal would look more like this: "I will spend two nights of quality time per week with my wife and daughters — playing games, exercising or other interactive activities. I will shut off my phone and focus my attention on them, building stronger connections as a family."

By recognizing (or creating) negative consequences for not achieving our goals, breaking goals into more achievable, bite-sized pieces and following the SMART system for creating better goals, maybe we can renew our resolutions this month and still make it to the finish line by Dec. 31.

Who's with me?

— Erin Wiley, of Maumee, is a licensed professional counselor at The Center For Solutions in Sylvania. You can contact her at 419-885-5952 or erinwiley@bex.net.