

How to Make Good on Your Best Intentions

Among many other things, your U.S. government keeps track of the most popular New Year's resolutions (you can find them here: <http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/New-Years-Resolutions.shtml>), and the list is about what you'd expect. At the top of the list is "lose weight," followed by, in order of popularity:

- Volunteer to help others
- Quit smoking
- Get a better education
- Get a better job
- Save money
- Get fit
- Eat healthy food

The *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, using a slightly different methodology, also found that "losing weight" was the number one resolution, followed by "getting organized" and "spend less, save more."

But here's the interesting part: the *Journal* found that just 8% of people are successful in achieving one or more of their resolutions in any given year, and 24% of us never succeed in achieving any of our resolutions year after year after year.

Why the high failure rate? Using MRI technology, brain scientists Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux studied what they called habitual behavior—that is, neural pathways and memories that become the default basis for our responses whenever we're faced with a choice or decision. These defaults, they found, are very difficult to change, and actually can be strengthened by efforts to "not do" things that feel natural or have been longstanding habits.

The lesson: Real change—actually succeeding in our resolutions—requires us to carve out new neural pathways. We need to rewire our brains.

How? Ray Williams, author of *Breaking Bad Habits*, offers a few suggestions that could dramatically raise your odds of success when it comes to resolutions. First, he says, make your resolution specific and realistic. Instead of resolving to "lose weight," set a goal to lose 10 pounds in 90 days. Then create a daily strategy for making that happen, taking small positive steps rather than expecting a big change to come over you all at once. Many people quit their resolutions because the goals are too big and require steps that are too large—all at once.

Of course, you still have to actually take those individual steps, and it's easy for them to get lost in the background noise of your daily life. Williams recommends that if you're truly serious about sticking to your resolutions, recruit an "accountability buddy" who you will have to report to on a regular basis. You'll find a way to get your resolutions on your own personal priority list, and do these things for someone else because you don't want to admit that you failed to take the steps you promised to do.

It may also help to keep the goals in front of you—on your computer screen or tacked up in a place where you can see them. This will remind you to ask yourself: what's the one thing I can do today, right now, towards my goal?

Don't give up when you slip—and you will. Simply continue working at your goal.

And finally: Recognize that creating new neural pathways in your brain is hard work—far more work than simply writing down a resolution. Remember the failure rate, and gird yourself accordingly.

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