Making Resolutions That Stick

"This year, I'm going to stop worrying so much." "I will get in shape, once and for all." "I'll stop spending beyond my means." "I'll get along better with my family." "I'll start that business I've always dreamed about." Have you made a resolution similar to one of these? Some of us want to lose weight, become more organized, or quit smoking. Others want to find a sense of purpose, more work/life balance, the courage to leave an unfulfilling career and start over. Whether it's New Year's Day, an important birthday, or just because we're fed up, at some point we vow to make that one leap or give up the thing that plagues us. But by the time the rosy blush of good intentions wears off, the resolution gets pushed aside. Not because we don't still long to have what we want, but because we just don't know how to change. We say we're going to change, we may even do it for a little while, but soon we find ourselves back to our old habits. Depending on what survey you've paying attention to, approximately 45 percent of us make New Year's resolutions, but only 8 percent succeed. Ninety percent of heart patients don't stick to the lifestyle changes they need to live longer and healthier lives. Even faced with the dramatic choice to change or die, they can't do it. I don't believe they want to die. They just don't know how to make the choice for life. Part of the problem is that we're flooded by bad advice. Right now, I'm staring at a women's magazine. It's the November 28th issue and the headline blares: YOU, 43 LBS SLIMMER By Christmas! I'm sorry but you, no matter who you are, are not going to be 43 pounds slimmer in 28 days using their diet or anyone else's. Such irresponsible "advice" does a great deal of harm. Because it creates unrealistic expectations, it increases the probability we'll give up before we get where we want to go. You and I can change. Not just superficially, or temporarily. We can stop doing the things that hold us back or cause us suffering and create a life filled with meaning and happiness. But it's not easy, as anyone who has tried to change a habit or do something new knows. To bring new behavior into being takes work. Our brains have enormous "plasticity," meaning they can create new cells and pathways. But our brains create strong tendencies to do the same thing over and over. Here's why: our neurons (brain cells) that fire together wire together. Meaning, they have a strong tendency to run the same program the next time. That's why lasting change takes lots of practice; you've got to create a pathway to the new options. (Six to nine months, say many brain scientists--so much for those seven-day wonder programs.) The process is not about getting rid of bad habits--the pathway to your current behavior is there for life, baby--but building new, more positive ones. Even stopping doing something, like smoking, is really about creating a good new habit, nonsmoking. Our brain structure is also why you've got to put external reminders in place, at least in the beginning. Unless we have a trigger from the outside--a note, a email reminder, a friend who shows up at the door to go to the gym with you--it's very likely you'll keep defaulting to the old behavior because it's automatic. That's also why it's so important to be willing to start over no matter how often you blow it or get discouraged. Do you keep hoping that a magic fairy will appear to make your dreams come true? That if you just read enough issues of Shape those thunder thighs will disappear? You're not alone. Most of us are also not concrete enough about what we want and unrealistic about what we can reasonably ask ourselves to learn. Here's what a new client of mine said he wanted to learn in three months: "to be less nit picky and fearful; to be more optimistic, to be more responsible and empathetic; to be more creative; to be more productive; to live a healthier life and to take better care of myself." "How about create world peace while you're at it?" I replied. "And what does `more' mean anyway? Even if it were possible to focus on all of this in that time frame, how will you know if you are more of any of these things?" As this client so touchingly demonstrated, we expect too much of ourselves and we expect to change overnight. When that doesn't happen, we resign ourselves to staying the same, convinced that we are hopeless, weak, or unmotivated. Which makes us even more stuck. As another of my clients, eager to lose weight, puts it, "Once I eat the first cookie, I figure I might as well go through the whole box." Top Ten Resolution Pitfalls 1. Being vague about what you want 2. Not making a serious commitment 3. Procrastinating and excuse-making--no time, wrong time, dog ate homework 4. Unwilling to go through the awkward phase 5. Not setting up a tracking and reminder system 6. Expecting perfection, falling into guilt, shame, regret 7. Trying to go it alone 8. Telling yourself self-limiting rut stories 9. Not having backup plans 10. Turning slip-ups to give-ups To truly change requires three things: desire, intent, and persistence. You have to identify what you desire enough to be willing to stick to, make specific, measurable, achievable goals ("stop yelling at my kids" rather than "having more patience," and avoid the common pitfalls (see sidebar). Armed with these attitudes and behaviors, you can cultivate any new habit or behavior. When you have this invaluable tool in your arsenal, you're not just getting fit, becoming more patient, or writing that novel. You've become empowered to experience greater satisfaction and fulfillment in your life because you can now bring anything you want into being. You've become the master of your fate rather than the victim of old choices. How's that for a Happy New Year?

About the Author

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Source: http://www.productsherbal.com