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Why Don't We Keep New Year's Resolutions?

By Pauline W. Wallin, Ph.D.

Like thousands of people this January, you probably will make a few resolutions; and, like thousands of people, you probably won't keep them, despite your good intentions. Here is why:

January first arrives after a month of celebration and excess, where self-discipline is not emphasized. In December we allow ourselves more food, alcohol, and self-indulgence than in other months. At some level, we know this cannot go on indefinitely, so we impose a mental stopping point: "On January first," we tell ourselves, "I'll go on a diet (or quit smoking, or get organized, or start an exercise program). I'll be ready by then."

During a period of over-indulgence, a person does not feel deprived. Because we place so few demands on ourselves to be disciplined during December, there is no immediate threat of deprivation. It's always easier to start next week, or next month. When New Year's Day arrives, we tend to expect that self-discipline will magically take over, and it does, sometimes for several days; but then, more often than not, we are soon overcome by a feeling of being deprived. We begin to resent the rules we imposed upon ourselves, and start to rebel in small ways. Pretty soon, the rationalization takes over completely, or else we give up in frustration and we're back to old habits again.

What went wrong? First, the timing may have been off. January 1 is not necessarily the best time to commit to lifestyle changes; there's nothing magical about that date. Second, too many people approach New Year's resolutions as if they were punishments for "bad" behavior. We can endure punishment only for so long before we rebel, even if it's against ourselves. Third, the changes that people try to make are often radically different from their normal lifestyle, and thus very difficult to maintain. If you want to stick with your resolutions this new year, here are some tips:

- Ask yourself whether you really want to change a habit or behavior pattern, or whether you feel obligated to do so. If your heart isn't in it, wait until a better time.

- Set realistic goals. Aim for *gradual* change. You are more likely to follow through on something that blends naturally into your current life.
- Set specific goals. It is not enough to want to change; you must delineate the steps you're going to take. Such an approach provides not only measurable goals, but also opportunity for reinforcement of the intermediate accomplishments along the way.
- Don't expect perfection in your behavioral changes – but don't allow yourself too much leeway, either. If you expect perfection, you'll tend to give up after the first time you deviate from your plan. If you allow yourself too much leeway, you'll find yourself gradually reverting back to old habits.
- Prepare for times when you're tempted to abandon your newfound discipline. For example, what will you do when someone offers you a drink or a fattening treat? You may choose to give in, or to say "no." Decide ahead of time, and be aware of the consequences.
- Remind yourself frequently of why you made the resolution – not just because you felt guilty, but also because you know you will appreciate the long-term benefits of lifestyle change.

In order to make a resolution stick, you must view it as a gift that you give to yourself. Discomfort may occur, but define it as part of the necessary transition – a nuisance, rather than a major obstacle.

Talk to someone who can help. If you would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our Psychologist Locator.