



# The Psychology of New Year Resolutions

The start of a new year can be a great time to take stock and consider what changes we'd like to make, or better yet, what goals we'd like to achieve in the coming year. 'New year, new me' – most of us have probably started a new year with a motto similar to this. Whether it is doing more exercise, quitting smoking, getting organised or saving money, the New Year seems to bring many exciting opportunities for personal improvement. However, research shows that fewer than 10% of us keep new years resolutions for more than a couple of months.

Does this mean that we should give up New Year's resolutions? Although big lifestyle changes can be difficult, we also know that setting goals can be hugely motivating. Indeed, people who make New Year's resolutions are 10 times more likely to achieve their goals than those who don't. What this means is we need to explore how to maximise our chances of sticking to resolutions.

## Why are NYRs so hard to keep?

New Year's resolutions tend to be made in contrast to a pre-existing habit. Maybe the habit is snacking on delicious chocolates or, maybe the habit is hitting snooze instead of getting up earlier to go to the gym. What research has shown us is that habits are hard to break as they have been repeatedly reinforced – we've done them a lot and often these habits have immediate benefits, like making us feel better in the short term.

Similarly, humans have a tendency of overestimating how easy it is to change behaviour. As a result, the New Year's resolutions we create tend to be significant changes, which aren't always realistic.

## How can we set ourselves up for success?



### Start small

Create smaller goals that are practical and that don't restrict you too much. Instead of cutting out all sweets, try initially replacing dessert with something healthier that you still enjoy, like fruit or yogurt. These resolutions will be easier to stick to, as you won't feel like you're missing out and will still move you one step closer to the big goal.



### Create clearly defined goals

Often when we set New Year's resolutions we make big sweeping gestures. Unfortunately, it's harder to keep yourself accountable when the goal isn't clear. For example, instead of deciding to 'exercise more', consider a more specific goal such as 'go for a 20-minute walk 3 times a week'. Clearly defined goals help us track our progress, which in turn keeps us motivated.



### Understand when old habits are strongest

There may be times when keeping a New Year's resolution is particularly challenging. That's because you may be getting context cues that tell your brain to go back to old habits. Take quitting smoking: if you used to smoke when having a drink with friends, you may get a strong desire to smoke when next having a drink. By knowing your triggers, you will be better prepared to manage those old habits.



### Get others involved

Telling someone your New Year's resolutions, or better yet, getting them involved, can drastically boost your achieving power. Telling others keeps us accountable as it's harder to break a promise to a friend than it is to ourselves. Additionally, when we create resolutions with someone else (like going to the gym with a friend once a week), it makes achieving the goal more fun which can keep us motivated for longer.



### Remember no one is perfect

New Year's resolutions can be big changes and we may not always stick to them. Instead of beating yourself up and becoming de-motivated, accept your lapses as a part of the process. If you are consistently not reaching your goal, maybe the goal is too big right now and you might find it helpful to break it down into smaller chunks. Regular reflection, adjustment and a focus on your wins is going to add up to a better chance of success in the long-term.

Overall setting small, attainable and supported goals throughout the year instead of a singular, overwhelming goal on January 1 can help you reach whatever it is you strive for. On behalf of the Assure Team, good luck with your resolutions!



### Want to know more?

Still struggling to achieve your goals? Contact Assure Programs for more information on 1800 808 374 or [info@assureprograms.com.au](mailto:info@assureprograms.com.au) and speak to us about getting support to achieve your goals through confidential counselling with one of our experienced psychologists.