

# The Psychology of New Year's Resolutions

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As we put the holidays behind us and dig out from underneath all of the wrapping paper (or snow! or both), many of us turn to the upcoming New Year's celebration to engage in a ritual that any visiting alien might be puzzled by — New Year's resolutions. Why do humans pick a single point in time each year to try and change certain things in their life — behaviors, attitudes, what-not — make resolutions about them, and then proceed to fail at them within a month's time?

The most popular New Year's goals people set, according to Miller and Marlatt (1998) are:

- 37% – Starting to exercise
- 13% – Eating better
- 7% – Reducing the consumption of alcohol, caffeine and other drugs, or quitting smoking

According to the same survey, most people — 75 percent — who make a resolution fail on their first attempt and most people — 67 percent — make more than one resolution.

So, from a psychological perspective, it might be interesting to ask what exactly determines how many goals people set and how successful they are. Luckily for us, researchers Mukhopadhyay and Johar (2005) did just that and came to some interesting conclusions.

Their research found that people who believe that self-control is something dynamic, changing and unlimited (e.g., "I can stop smoking, all I have to do is put my mind to it. I can also change my eating and be a better person, it just takes willpower.") tend to set more resolutions.

People who believe that we all are born with a limited, set amount of self-control that one cannot change (e.g., "I can't help myself from eating all this chocolate — I inherited the 'chocolate gene' from my mom!") and who also have little belief in their own capabilities to carry out their own goals (they have what psychologists refer to as "low self-efficacy") naturally did worse on obtaining their New Year's resolution goals.

As the researchers summarized, individuals with high self-efficacy attribute failure to insufficient effort, while individuals with low self-efficacy attribute failure to deficient ability. Higher self-efficacy generally is correlated with a greater likelihood of achieving one's goals.

The investigators also found that if you are made to believe that self-control is a fixed or limited resource that you can't change, you will also set fewer goals and will give up on them sooner, regardless of your level of self-efficacy.

What all of this means is that you'll do better on your New Year's goals if you believe that self-control is indeed an unlimited resource that we all have access to and can leverage with our resolutions. The more you believe in your own capabilities — high self-efficacy — the

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more likely you will succeed as well. And it also seems to help to set more goals, because you will be more likely to succeed at them if you do (people who set fewer goals seem to often go into the exercise with the self-fulfilling expectation of failing).

Other research points to having the actual skills to make the changes you're proposing for your life. For instance, it's all fine and well to say you want to quit smoking. But do you really have any idea on how to do so? Researching the most effective methods for quitting ahead of time predicts better success in actually achieving your goal. And of course, being ready to change also helps. If you don't want to change and so only make a half-hearted resolution to do so, don't be surprised by your amazing lack of success.

Miller & Marlatt (1998) also suggest the following:

To be successful with your own resolutions:

- Have a strong initial commitment to make a change.
- Have coping strategies to deal with problems that will come up.
- Keep track of your progress. The more monitoring you do and feedback you get, the better you will do.

Ingredients for setting yourself up for resolution failure include:

- Not thinking about making resolutions until the last minute.
- Reacting on New Year's Eve and making your resolutions based on what's bothering you or is on your mind at that time.
- Framing your resolutions as absolutes by saying, "I will never do X again."

Good luck with your own New Year's resolutions! And if you want more tips and ideas on how to be successful in coping with the new year, check out our [New Year's Guide](#), which offers more tips on setting good resolutions, how to welcome change in your life, and dealing with the post-holiday blues.

## References:

Miller, E.T. & Marlatt, G.A. (1998). How to Keep Up with Those New Year's Resolutions: Researchers Find Commitment Is the Secret of Success. Retrieved online: <http://www.washington.edu/newsroom/news/1997archive/12-97archive/k122397.html>

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