

resolution REBOOT

We're now halfway through 2018, and for many of us, the resolutions made in the optimism of the New Year may have fallen by the wayside. But don't worry – here's your guide to getting back on track

BY PAUL LITTLE

How did you start the year? Resolving to stop smoking/cut back on the wines/do more exercise/drink less coffee/read more books? Good for you. How's it going now we're halfway through 2018?

Thought so. Many people don't make New Year's resolutions at all, simply because they fear failure, says Rebecca Stafford, author of forthcoming book *The 21-Day Myth*, which overturns some accepted beliefs about how changing our behaviours works. According to Stafford, "People typically say: 'I didn't make any New Year's resolutions. I've stopped making them because they never stick.'"

But even though many of us struggle to keep up the good intentions with which we started the year, resolutions are still an effective way to kick-start change for the better in our lives. Registered psychologist Sara Chatwin, of Auckland's MindWorks, likes them.

"At the beginning of the year, they give us a focus," says Chatwin. "They initiate

a mindset that gives us a direction."

She's not alone in thinking so. According to Moya Sarnier, writing in *The Guardian*, there's plenty of research "to show that New Year's resolutions are an effective way to make changes. They create a sense of expectation and ceremony, while the link to a particular day helps to fit our experiences into a narrative of before and after, which makes change more likely."

GET YOUR AIM RIGHT

One of the most common reasons for missing our targets, according to clinical psychologist Jeremy Clark, is that we fail to aim properly.

"When you make goals, they have to be achievable and specific. If we make a big change all at once – cut out pies, or soft drinks or meat, or decide to go straight to being vegan – it's unsustainable. It's much more achievable to cut out one thing, get used to that, move on to the next, and so on."

Another reason we fail, he says, is that >>

we don't really want to succeed. "We just get too much reward from the other way of doing things; too much reward from the food or drinking."

Stafford says relying on willpower – or even thinking willpower is important – is a frequent and fatal error.

"Willpower is a colloquial term for self-control," she says. "It means the ability to defer immediate gratification and hold out for rewards. The myth is that most people think willpower is something you have or don't have. But there are things we can do to boost it or drain it."

BRIBERY WORKS

With or without willpower, she says, we are "more motivated by tiny and immediate things. A doughnut now has more power than weight loss in six months. Huge and remote goals aren't nearly so effective."

If you've made these mistakes and failed to follow through on your resolutions, how do you get started again? Instead of thinking in terms of willpower, says Stafford, we should think in terms of rewards and "slap on rewards for even the least amount of effort, if we want to fast-track habit change". It seems just knowing a reward, however trivial it might seem, is close at hand will help get us over the willpower hump.

The rewards can be effective even if they're as small and simple as a half-hour TV break or a few squares of chocolate.

Chatwin says rewards also have to be



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suited to the individual. "For me, a reward is something like a movie, or time alone if you have a large family. Or it might be a wee trip or weekend away if it's a bigger deal. But the reward has to be meaningful in your world."

Also, she advises, say no to negativity. If you're feeling disappointed with yourself, "stop that thought. That's a waste of time and space. Sit down and say: 'If I did have two good months of healthy eating, exercise, saving money, how can I get back? How did I start well? What were the factors that brought me to the positive things?'"

You're never back at square one, she says. If you had two good months, you've already put some positive behaviour patterns in place. This is also where professional counsellors or psychologists can help.

Professionals don't know the people they're advising, says Chatwin. "We don't judge them."

And not only are professionals objective, they have qualifications, unlike the whole army of well-meaning bloggers out there with megabytes of free advice for anyone who can use a mouse.

Family and friends can be helpful, but they're not objective either, and they may have their own motives for wanting you to change or not to change.

"Sometimes friends don't want to see their friends getting lean, mean and terrific," says Chatwin.

Clark comes "from a clinical perspective, where my work is about helping people change problematic behaviours". He has several strategies for

anyone wanting to reboot their New Year's resolutions.

"One is realising the difference between our emotional side and our logical or reasonable side,"he says. "If decisions are made [based on] emotion entirely, they're sometimes not the best. But if we do a Mr Spock-style process and just use logic, we can also find ourselves in difficult circumstances.

"For instance, it would be logical for me to put all my disposable income into a savings account or house deposit. But that doesn't take into account my emotional desire for surfboards. The key is recognising those two tensions; realising they're on a continuum and that there is a middle ground of compromise that we can find."

Photographs Getty Images

DO IT ON AUTO

Clark advises avoiding the all-or-nothing approach. For instance, we're more likely to get good results if we decide to change the way we drink over time, rather than just try to stop drinking. When we do the latter, we set ourselves up for a cycle where "we know we'll have challenges, we'll get stressed and we'll start drinking again".

Instead, we can accept or acknowledge our problems and commit to changing certain behaviours that contribute to them. We may decide it's okay to drink, as long as we continue to act according to our values such as having a good work ethic, being reliable or being trustworthy.

"The long-term commitment may be to stop drinking," says Clark, "but you can do well by committing to smaller goals. You acknowledge you're not there yet, but you're on your way."

One of the most popular New Year's resolutions is deciding to hit the gym and endure the pain that ensures the gain. But it has to start with the mind, says Monique Rana, co-founder of Auckland's BodyTech. "You have to goal-set," says Rana. "You have to schedule workouts. If you don't plan, you're planning to fail."

Trainers know that sometimes life gets in the way of exercise. "You can have an illness, lose your job or find you need to look after elderly parents."

But, Rana continues, there's always a way, and it doesn't need to be a major commitment. "Just getting outside for 20 or 30 minutes a day to get that vitamin D will make you feel you've achieved something for yourself."

Most people can manage 30 minutes out of their 24-hour day. Do that three times a week and before you know it you'll have developed an exercise habit.

Many experts say acquiring new habits is the key to success. People who meet their goals aren't performing formidable feats of willpower, they're performing formidable feats of gaining new habits.

"They automate the behaviours that get them to their goals, so they perform them without even thinking about it," says Californian psychology professor Wendy Wood. When we have a habit we don't exercise self-control, we exercise – or eat, or drink – automatically. It becomes harder not to do the right thing because we'd have to break a habit.

Habits, whether good or bad, are made up of a cue, a routine and a reward. Take smoking: the cue can be getting home from work, the routine is smoking the cigarette and the reward is the relief of our need for a nicotine fix. Or, for a healthier example, exercise might be cued by getting out of bed in the morning, the routine is the run or workout and the reward is the substantial breakfast we've earned and can enjoy. Once you've done this a few times consciously, you'll find you do it automatically.

So, taking the advice of our experts, it's clear this is the perfect time of year to reboot with some mid-year resolutions. Unlike New Year's resolutions, you're only committing for six more months. And once you've got through that, you'll be well-armed to commit to 12 months of self-improvement in 2019. Happy new year. ✱

A year of it

There weren't any questions on what our New Year's resolutions were or how well we stuck to them in this year's census, but it's likely our results would mirror those of an American survey by the Statistic Brain Research Institute, which listed the top five resolutions for last year as:

- Lose weight/eat healthier **21%**
- Life/self-improvements **12%**
- Better financial decisions **8.5%**
- Quit smoking **7%**
- Do more exciting things **6%**

In 2017, 41% of Americans made resolutions but only 9.2% felt they were successful sticking to them, while 42% felt they failed. Although 73% of people maintained their resolution through the first week of January, by the mid-year point only 45% of people were still sticking to the promises they made themselves. (If you're wondering why smoking is such a small percentage, it's because so few people smoke these days.)

'YOU HAVE TO GOAL-SET. YOU HAVE TO SCHEDULE WORKOUTS. IF YOU DON'T PLAN, YOU'RE PLANNING TO FAIL'

Accentuate the positive

According to psychologist Rebecca Stafford, one of the most useful ways to get back on track and stop beating yourself up for failing to keep your resolutions is to perform a mini-intervention on yourself. This self-compassion exercise was part of research at the University of California at Berkeley. "It's great because you simply can't do it and beat yourself up at the same time," says Chatwin of the initiative. "The instructions were to think of a personal failing you felt bad about and write for three minutes about this from a compassionate and understanding perspective." Control trials of students with bad study habits showed those who did the exercise studied more and procrastinated less. "Sometimes the only thing wrong with us is that we think there's something wrong with us, and this exercise drives out that negative talk."

