

10 Ways to Make Your New Year's Resolutions Stick

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10 ways to stay strong in the face of tempting cupcakes, pricey shoes, and the urge to hit the snooze button instead of the gym.

There's an inevitable rhythm to January 1 at my house. I take down the tree, vacuum up pine needles, and start making my New Year's resolutions. The list usually looks like this: *Lose weight. Swear off TV and saturated fat. Eat salads. Call Dad more. Write that novel. Floss.* By midday I'm worn out, intermittently dozing in front of a football game and swiping my husband's million-calorie nachos.



It's not that I totally lack discipline. It's just that I don't sufficiently appreciate what's going on in my brain, explains Joseph Shrand, M.D., an instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Self-restraint is a rational desire, which means it lives in the front of the brain, the section that's most recently evolved and most vulnerable to being overruled by survival instincts.

Pleasure resides in the brain's most primitive part, which has spent millions of years learning to reward us with a deeply satisfying jolt of dopamine when we give in to these kinds of urges. And while that brain circuitry evolved to encourage life-prolonging desires like eating and sex, says Dr. Shrand, we now get a rush from giving in to anything we want, whether it's an illicit drug, chocolate, or buying expensive purple peep-toe boots, even when the more evolved part of our brain tells us we'll quickly regret it.

So how do you help the rational (i.e., your New Year's resolutions) triumph over the pleasure-seeking? You need to outsmart it with these research-proven strategies.

1. Give It a Workout

I'd always thought of willpower as a steady, steely resolve that made some women triathletes and some (not my real name) couch-nappers. But it's more like a muscle, says Marvin D. Seppala, M.D., chief medical officer at Hazelden, the well-known addiction treatment center. That means the more we use it, the stronger it gets — and quickly. In an experiment at the University at Albany — State University of New York, researchers asked 122 smokers who were trying to quit to exert extra self-control for two weeks, either by avoiding sweets or by squeezing on a grip strengthener for as long as they could twice a day. In the following month, 27 percent of those who were diligent about practicing their self-control exercise successfully kicked their cigarette habit, compared with just 12 percent of volunteers who'd been given a task that didn't call for self-control.

To try this at home, squeeze a grip strengthener (available at sporting-goods stores for under \$10) or a rubber ball till it becomes uncomfortable, then hold as long as you can. Repeat at least twice a day. Or, flex your self-control emotionally by trying not to tear up during a sad movie. Just don't expect to become the Wonder Woman of Willpower, advises psychologist and study author Mark Muraven, Ph.D. As with a muscle, push too hard or under conditions that are too challenging, and your resolve (like an overworked hamstring) will collapse. "If you're very hungry, I can't imagine that any amount of willpower will keep you from eating a cupcake," Muraven says.

2. Make One Change at a Time

Once you understand that you have only a limited amount of willpower, it's easy to understand why multiple resolutions aren't likely to work, says Ian Newby-Clark, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Guelph in Canada. Most resolutions actually require many behavior changes. Sure,

some are straightforward, like remembering to take a calcium pill every day — but a successful weight-loss program, for example, calls for more than just a decision to eat less. You have to shop and cook differently, start or ramp up an exercise routine, maybe even ditch certain social or family events. "Thinking through these substrategies boosts success rates," says Newby-Clark. "But it would take too much attention and vigilance to do all that and also decide it's time to brush your teeth for the full two minutes and become better informed about world events."

3. Break It Up

Since your supply of self-control is finite, make resolutions that require small acts of will, not weeks of vigilance. " 'Lose 10 pounds' sounds specific, but it's less likely to work than behavioral goals like 'This week I'll try to go to the gym three times, take the stairs at work at least twice, and bring a healthy lunch every day,' " says Andrea Bonior, Ph.D., a psychologist in private practice in Washington, DC, and author of the "Baggage Check" column for the *Washington Post Express*. You'll feel good when you accomplish each goal, and your success will help bolster your resolve: The better you are at making small changes, the easier it will be for you to keep going.

4. Lift Your Spirits

Watching funny movies — or doing just about anything that puts you in a good mood — also helps when willpower starts wearing down. In a particularly sneaky study, researchers asked a group of 30 hungry students to sit in a room that smelled like freshly baked cookies. Although a plate of M&Ms and still-warm cookies was placed within reach, participants were told to snack on a bowl of radishes. Then they were left alone for 10 to 12 minutes in order to exhaust their self-restraint.

Next, some of the students watched a film clip of Robin Williams doing stand-up, while another group viewed a film about dolphins. When, in the last part of the experiment, they were asked to perform a complex tracing project that called for lots of self-control, students who'd seen the funny film stuck with the trying task for about 13 minutes. The Flipper crowd hung in for only nine.

5. Have Some OJ

Self-restraint — stifling your disagreement during a politically charged discussion, for example — can reduce blood glucose to less-than-optimal levels, report Florida State University researchers. But a glass of orange juice or lemonade can replenish your self-control. The brain relies almost exclusively on glucose for energy, so it has to be the real thing — artificially sweetened drinks won't deliver the jolt.

6. Outwit Your Inner Rebel

To give your willpower some wiggle room, avoid making 100 percent resolutions. "Absolutes like 'I'm giving up all sweets' or 'I'll never use my credit card again' set you up to try to get around your own overly strict rules," says Connie Stapleton, Ph.D., a psychologist in Augusta, GA. Instead, try drafting more limited restrictions like "I'll have sweets only when I'm in a fancy restaurant."

7. Crank Up Your Greatest Hits

When you feel discouraged, remind yourself how much you've accomplished in the past, suggests Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D. "People beat themselves up about still needing to lose the baby weight or no longer going to yoga class. But they overlook the long list of things they have done that required major self-discipline, like building a nest egg or sticking with the computer training they needed in order to get a better job." Lombardo's advice: "Write down 100 things you're proud of, right down to 'I get out of bed when I don't want to.' It'll remind you how much willpower you really have."

8. Be Extra Nice (Or Nasty)

Do unto others, and you'll be doing unto yourself as well. In a Harvard University study, psychologist Kurt Gray, Ph.D., gave 80 participants a dollar, told half the group to keep it and the other half to give it to charity, and then asked all the volunteers to hold a five-pound weight for as long as they could. Those who had donated their buck to a good cause held the weight significantly longer than the "selfish" ones.

But imagining doing something not nice makes us even stronger. In another experiment, Gray asked participants to hold the weight while writing a story that involved their helping someone, harming someone, or doing something neutral. Those who envisioned dastardly deeds held the weight longer than the helpful ones, who in turn beat out the neutrals. Whether we're doing someone a good turn or a bad one, it increases our feeling of personal power, making it easier to stick with something uncomfortable, says Gray.

9. Use Your Senses

The primitive cravings center is highly susceptible to visual cues, explains Tufts University psychologist Christopher Willard, Psy.D. Draw on the strength of images by putting a photo of a thinner you on the fridge, or a picture of a Caribbean beach in your wallet near your credit cards to remind yourself of the vacation that you're saving for.

10. Finally, Get Out of Dodge

The same way a sprinter can tell when she doesn't have another 100 yards in her, "it's important to know when your resistance is tapped out," says Dr. Seppala. "Stress will wear it down. So will being hungry or tired." His advice for those times: Get away from whatever is tempting you until you've eaten and rested, which will give your willpower a fighting chance.