



New Year's Resolutions Are Bad for You

By Jessica Lamb-Shapiro – Time Ideas contributor

Everyone has a mental list of habits they would like to change, and the New Year seems like a perfect time to start. “New Year, new you” is a phrase you will see repeated in print. But this is just singsong rhetoric. Just because it sounds right to your ear does not mean that it contains any meaningful truth. The year will certainly change, but you will likely be the same person on Jan. 1, 2014, that you were on Dec. 31, 2013.

The statistics are bleak: only 8% of people who make New Year's resolutions stick to them, and those who don't usually abandon them after just one week. Unrealistic resolutions are fated to fail. And it is unrealistic to think that you can immediately overcome a habit you have spent years establishing. But is this necessarily harmful? There's a good chance that it is. If your New Year's resolution is to eat less, but you have no plan in place — or even if you do have a plan and you fail — you will do damage to your sense of self-worth. If you already have a complicated relationship with food, your likely coping mechanism for failure is eating more food. Thus the New Year's resolution to eat less can actually result in your eating more. Ditto with other bad habits

The practice of making resolutions itself dates back to ancient Babylon, who made promises to their gods for the New Year, often having to do with concrete, easily achievable tasks like vowing to return borrowed farm equipment. Now promises are made to ourselves and are primarily psychological in nature. With the threat of godly repercussion removed and more complex problems to solve, the odds of success are significantly reduced.

When you tie your behavioral change to a specific date, you rob yourself of an opportunity to fail and recover, to “fail better.” If you believe that you can only change on the New Year — the inherent message of New Year's resolutions — you will have to wait a whole year before you get another shot.

Just the act of making a resolution can make you feel temporarily better; enough that it obviates further action. Steve Salerno, author of *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*, says, “Do we all not know people who make the same resolutions year after year? Or maybe we *are* that person. My concern is that the resolution takes the place of the action, as is also true with so many millions of people who sign up for an endless succession of self-help programs: They think some magic words, some avowed promise, will magically transform their lives, when we all know that the real transformational work is tough, grueling, and usually involves sacrifice and unpleasant choices.”

Here's a better idea. Instead of listing an abstract goal like "lose weight," think of specific small steps you can take, every day, that will have the same result. If you fail at any of these small steps — which you inevitably will — brush it off, and realize that failure and recovery is part of any process. Don't tie your list to any specific date, and don't wait a year to start again when you slip up.

Source: Jessica Lamb-Shapiro is the author of *Promise Land: My Journey Through America's Self-Help Culture*. The views expressed are solely her own.

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