

Baby steps to better living

by Dawn Klingensmith

One reason New Year's resolutions don't stick is because people set vague or overly ambitious goals and lack plans to bring those goals within reach. This year, instead of reaching for the sky and falling far short of your aim, why not focus on implementing small behavioral modifications that can make significant, skyward changes over time? If your goal is to lose weight, for example, resolve not to lose 30 pounds but to skip second helpings.

Once this intermediate action becomes habitual, move on to another modest goal, such as walking around the block every morning when you go to grab the newspaper.

According to experts, true and lasting change is attained not by leaps and bounds but by baby steps. Most of us realize that goals should be broken down into steps, but the purpose is not merely to make our objectives less overwhelming and more manageable. Steady, incremental advancements toward an ultimate goal also prime us for success by creating a track record of achievement.

"You can't one day have a bad habit and the next day have a positive one," says behavioral psychologist Dana Lightman of Abington, Penn. Thought and behavioral patterns that perpetuate bad habits "are literally engraved on the brain in the form of neural pathways."

Those pathways can't be rerouted overnight, but a series of

successfully executed "baby steps" can eventually carve new circuitry in our brains. "The key is to (resolve to) do something that you can keep repeating," Lightman says. "That's how you create new pathways."

She recommends starting by writing down a single "vision statement," such as "I choose to live a healthier lifestyle," and then figuring out the small steps necessary to attain that goal.

Prefacing resolutions with the words "I choose to" - as opposed to "I have to" or "I should" - is critical because it puts control in your hands instead of subjecting you to an internal taskmaster, which inevitably leads to resistance, says Dr. Neil Fiore, the Berkeley, Calif.-based author of *Awaken Your Strongest Self: Break Free of Stress, Inner Conflict and Self Sabotage*.

Saying "I want to" instead of "I choose to" also can cause lapses in resolve, he cautions. You can tell yourself you want to have herbal tea instead of dessert, but your sweet tooth will call you a liar and mount a rebellion. So you choose to have the herbal tea, which is not the same as wanting, and that's OK - you still get a gold star for the day. Another strategy for success is to couch your resolution in positive terms. Instead of saying "I will avoid sweets," tell yourself, "I choose to eat fruits as snacks." Otherwise, your brain will fixate on the very behavior you're trying to avoid.

"If you say to yourself, 'I want to quit smoking, I want to quit smoking, I want to quit smoking,' what your brain hears is 'smoking, smoking, smoking,'" Lightman says, so don't be surprised if such a mantra leads to an even greater urge to light up.

And speaking of mantras, researchers say that daily affirmations aren't as effective as implementation intentions, which is the fancy name for

working out exactly how and when you intend to carry out your resolutions. So not only do you say you're going to do X, but you resolve to do X in situation Y at time Z.

According to New York University psychology professor Peter Gollwitzer, who coined the term, an implementation intention "delegates the initiation of the goal-directed behavior to environmental stimuli."

For example, if you resolve to jog around the block each morning, you should set yourself up for success by placing your workout clothes next to your bed and saying, "As soon as I get up, I'm going to suit up and head out the door."

Creating an implementation intention breaks your goal down into specific tasks and provides you with cues - concrete, external stimuli - that signal what you're supposed to be doing. So if you usually get out of bed in the morning and head straight for the shower, your jogging clothes remind you there's been a change of plans.

Small steps lead to big gains because they allow you to start identifying with the person you'd like to be and to dip your toes in the lifestyle you'd like to have. If you start out with a modest goal like skipping second helpings, by the end of three months, you've established a pattern and an identity as a moderate eater, Lightman says, and lifelong weight management will be closer at hand.

Baby steps toward...

Better Nutrition - Eat the recommended number of fruit and vegetable servings every day. Depending on sex and age, adults should eat between two to three cups of vegetables and one-and-a-half to two cups of fruit, according to the U.S. government. The

Produce for Better Health Foundation 5 a Day program promotes eating a colorful variety of fruits and vegetables - blue/purple, green, white (bananas, pears, cauliflower), yellow/orange, and red - because each of the five color groups offers certain health benefits.

Better Home Organization - Open and sort the mail as soon as you get it.

Recycle junk mail immediately. Buy a small shredder (less than \$20 at office stores) for correspondence that contains personal information - account numbers, Social Security numbers, health or financial data - that you don't need to keep on file.

Better Relationships - Create family bonding opportunities. Routines and rituals are important to the well-being of today's families. According to the American Psychology Association, routines (such as structured dinnertime and bedtime activities) and rituals (weekly pizza night, holiday traditions) are associated with marital satisfaction, academic achievement, and strong

family relationships.

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