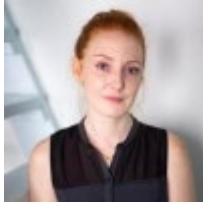


How to stick to your New Year's resolutions, according to experts

Megan DeLaire, CTVNews.ca Writer, Published Jan. 1, 2023 9:00 a.m. AST



The time has come to usher in another January and another year.

For many people, January presents an opportunity to set a positive tone for the coming year by making resolutions. But for people who aren't naturally goal-oriented, they can come with high expectations and a fear of failure.

According to Simon Sherry, a professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University, there is a certain amount of predisposition – a combination of personality and upbringing – that determines a person's ability to achieve goals.

"For example, if you're characterized by a personality trait called conscientiousness, you're better at setting and achieving goals," Sherry told CTVNews.ca during a telephone interview on Thursday. "People who are conscientious are, by nature, by disposition, organized, reliable, punctual and achievement-oriented."

On the other hand, Sherry said, traits like perfectionism can present a barrier to achieving goals, paralyzing some people with the prospect of failure before they've had a chance to try.

Sandra McDermid, a Canadian life coach practicing in the United Kingdom, says it's common for people to dismiss their own goals as unattainable when, really, they're perfectly realistic.

"We see these resolutions as being something that's this impossible goal we're going to try to strive for, instead of seeing them as actually very realistic," she told CTVNews.ca in a phone interview on Thursday. "It's just a series of steps that we have to take to get there."

Whether you're a master goal-setter or just someone who wants to start 2023 on a positive note, here are Sherry and McDermid's best tips for keeping your New Year's resolutions.

BE SPECIFIC ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT

When it comes to aspirations like saving money, improving relationships, or getting fit, McDermid said specific goals are easier to work toward than vague ones.

If you want to save money, think about what you're saving for, how much you want to save and how much time you're allowing yourself to reach that goal. Visualize what it will look like to achieve your goal. If your goal is related to weight, does the result look like fitting into a certain size of clothing or seeing a specific number on the scale?

"It's just seeing something you really want, having reasons for wanting it and planning it," McDermid said.

"So the more you can visualize something, the better."

Specificity is the first component of the S.M.A.R.T. strategy, a goal-setting technique Sherry says can help with achieving resolutions. S.M.A.R.T. is an acronym for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely goals. People setting S.M.A.R.T. goals define what they want to accomplish, determine how they will measure their progress, ensure their goals are achievable and realistic, and set a timeline for hitting them.

"Not only do I recommend it, I do it for myself," Sherry said. "It's a useful strategy."

KNOW WHY YOU'RE DOING IT

Resolutions usually aren't goals that can be achieved immediately or without consistent effort, and in the time it takes to follow through with them, it's common for obstacles to arise.

When working toward a goal feels especially hard, McDermid said it's important to know why it's worth the effort.

"Write out a list of 20 reasons that you want this," she said, "because at any given moment, it will be a different reason keeping you on track."

McDermid said the more reasons you can list, the better. That way, if one reason no longer motivates you, there are others that will. For example, feeling comfortable in your favourite pair of jeans might be a compelling

reason to get in shape, but will it sustain your new healthy habits in the long term?

"That may not be enough," McDermid said. "It may be that you want to avoid cancer in the future, or you want to be able to push yourself further climbing a hill or you want to be stronger."

When it inevitably becomes hard to stay on track, return to the reasons you've written down to remind yourself why you're putting in the effort.

KNOW HOW YOU'RE DOING IT

Setting intentions and knowing why they're important to you is a good start toward achieving a big goal like a New Year's resolution. But most goals involve changing your behaviour in a meaningful and long-lasting way, which requires planning and consistent work.

When Sherry wants to achieve a goal, he sets an action plan called an "implementation intention." Think of implementation intentions as very specific, circumstance-based instructions for behaviour.

"You could think of an implementation intention as a series of if-then plans," Sherry said. "So if I put fruit in the fridge, then I'm more likely to make a healthy dietary choice. If I discard the chips from the cupboard, then I'm less likely to eat them."

Setting these if-when rules can help create healthy habits that turn intention into new behaviour.

"You write out these little action sequences. And while this writing out exercise in no way guarantees that you close the gap between intention and behaviour, it's been shown to help in research," Sherry said.

ENJOY THE PROCESS

Find a way to turn the process of meeting your goal into a gratifying – rather than punishing – experience. If you can do that, McDermid says you're off to a good start.

"I think it's embracing the enjoyment of the process of getting there," she said. She gave the example of marathon runners who spend more time training for marathons than running in them, but take satisfaction from each training session.

"People who do it really well are the people who go, 'I am going to feel gratification each week I do well, not once I get there,'" McDermid said.

One way to make working toward your goal a gratifying experience, Sherry said, is to incorporate other people into the process. If your goal is sobriety, spend time with sober friends. If your goal is to run more, find someone to run with.

"It's called social facilitation," Sherry said. "If you have a gym buddy, you're more likely to follow through because it introduces a group effect where you pull each other along, and there's a level of accountability to all that."

HAVE A PLAN FOR WHEN YOU SLIP UP

McDermid said it's natural to slip up when trying to change behaviour, but it needn't derail your goals. In fact, she said any goal should include a contingency plan for how to get back on track after a lapse.

"People forget to plan for how they might fall off track to then get back on it," she said, adding that it helps to identify triggers or circumstances that might lead to a lapse before they arise.

When a lapse does happen, Sherry said it's important to practice compassion rather than self-criticism.

"A self-compassionate response is being kind to yourself, recognizing that you're not the only one who struggled to lose weight or eat healthier," Sherry said. "And this is quite often paired with a sense of acceptance. A compassionate, kind, accepting voice is important to goal attainment."

DON'T WAIT FOR JAN. 1

If you know in mid-December that you want to set a new savings goal, start a fitness routine, schedule an appointment with a therapist or work toward any other resolution, there's no need to wait until Jan. 1 to take action. After all, it's just a day.

Starting early can even give you an extra boost, according to McDermid.

"It's teaching yourself that you can do anything in any one moment," she said. "So that is actually more powerful than anything else."

Next year, rather than putting the start of your new plan off until Jan. 1, try taking the first steps as soon as you feel motivated.

"That is where we start to go, 'Oh, look, I'm a person who can do these things,'" McDermid said. "And then we have a little bit of pride in ourselves."