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## Stick to the plan — New Year’s resolutions can work if they are realistic and there’s accountability

New Year's one starting point of many, but without some starting point, nobody would ever make change

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After the New Year’s Eve celebrations are over, some people vow to improve their lives by making resolutions they may or may not be able to realize. Myriam Zilles photo/Unsplash - Myriam Zilles photo/Unsplash

*Special to Saltwire Network*

New Year’s Resolutions occupy a weird place in the culture. It seems like there’s a mix of people who swear by them and people who’ve sworn them off.

I did an informal Facebook poll to see what folks thought about New Year's resolutions in general. I got what I expected, which is a mix of people who'd given up on making them, people who swore by them as a successful way of getting to a goal and people who thought the whole idea was nonsense.

And so, when I interviewed three experts about New Year's resolutions, I sort of expected to hear something along the lines of "New Year's is overblown and not useful for achieving goals." Instead, what I got was more nuanced, which is the way these things usually go.

### **It's about timing**

"New Years is a temporal landmark and humans like temporal landmarks," said psychologist and Dalhousie University professor Simon Sherry. "Temporal landmarks motivate aspirational behavior. Sometimes it's New Year's Eve, other times it's a birthday.

"A lot of people end up starting a new goal at the beginning of a month or the beginning of a semester at school. And, so, we set these temporal landmarks and they provide motivation but they also allow us an opportunity to get a big picture view of our lives, to step back and appraise."

As Leslie Phillips, professor and smoking cessation expert from Newfoundland and Labrador's Memorial University noted, answering the question of whether this works is complicated and doesn't lend itself to simple New Year's good/New Year's bad takes.



Leslie Phillips, professor and smoking cessation expert from Newfoundland and Labrador's Memorial University, says New Year's resolutions are a complicated matter. Contributed photo - Contributed photo

“People tend to associate behaviors more around temporal milestones,” she said. “New Year's Day, I think, is probably the most common behaviour change day of the year for sure. It's certainly associated with a new beginning, a clean slate, all that sort of thing.”

“I don't think smoking is any different. How successful is quitting smoking if you pick it as a New Year's resolution? It's hard to say because, if you try to study something like that, you probably get what we call selection bias, where the people who would sign up to be in your study were the ones who were more motivated to begin with, simply by the fact that they signed up.”

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'People use New Year's as their starting point and they don't realize that, no matter what time you start, nothing actually really magical happens at the strike of midnight on New Year's Day right?'

— *Dan Archibald, personal trainer and coach*

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Dan Archibald, a personal trainer and coach from Prince Edward Island sees New Year's as just one of any number of potential starting points for change.

“The fitness industry seems to be the one where everyone's like, ‘That's it. I'm gonna get through the holidays and have my treats and everything else and then, as soon as the new year comes, new year, new me. I'm tackling this. I'm gonna finally do this.’

“At every gym that I've ever worked at or been a part of, you see just the massive influx in January. People use New Year's as their starting point and they don't realize that, no matter what time you start, nothing actually really magical happens at the strike of midnight on New Year's Day right?”

Archibald's point is the paradox of New Year's that all three experts pinpointed. It's just one starting point of many; it's not inherently special. But without some starting point, nobody would ever make change. And, so, as this article lurches inevitably towards a list, here are some ways Sherry, Phillips and Archibald told me you can seize this moment of personal reflection:

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Dan Archibald, a personal trainer and coach from Prince Edward Island sees New Year's as just one of any number of potential starting points for change. Contributed photo - Contributed photo

### **Find a Goal That's Yours**

External forces can help focus you on a goal, but if you're going to keep working when they fade away, your goal needs to really belong to you.

“You've got to make sure that your goal is truly your own goal, that it's a goal that reflects your personal interests and your personal values as opposed to trying to adopt somebody else's or feeling externally pressured to reach a goal,” said Sherry. “We're less likely to pursue and achieve a goal if we feel nagged or pressured by an external source to do so. So, pick out a goal that matches who you are and how you roll.”

### **Make a Plan**

Quitting smoking is one of the hardest things a person can resolve to do. You're battling a chemical addiction alongside a pattern of behaviour and the deck is stacked against you. It's not something to be decided on at the last minute.

“Having a plan, I think, is really key,” said Phillips. “(Of the) People who don't have a plan, who sort of like just on a whim decide ‘I'm going to quit or quit cold turkey,’ only about three to five per cent of those individuals are still quit six months later.

“Get lots of support, friends, family, a health-care professional.”



While some give up on their resolutions if they slip up, the experts advise using those missteps as learning experiences, rather than seeing them as failures. Rafał Opalski photo/Unsplash - Rafał Opalski photo/Unsplash

If you're resolving to get fit, Archibald said that a plan is just as essential to making sure it sticks. Whether you're hiring a trainer or sticking with a running buddy, it's about a serious approach and holding yourself accountable.

“The plan of action, the things that you have in your holster to give you success,” he commented. “To know that the first couple weeks are going to suck. Know that it's going to be a learning curve.”

## **Find Support**

Resolutions are most successful when we have support in reaching them.

“I think it’d be good to capitalize on something you call social facilitation,” said Sherry. “Find an exercise buddy. Find a friend who could be a partner in accountability with you. There’s often a power in a group that you can capitalize on. You want to pursue your fitness goal, well maybe you want to get a running group in your life or join a CrossFit box. We can use other people for motivation and for accountability.”

## **Be Nice to Yourself**

The experts I talked to confirmed what we’ve all experienced: that many resolutions don’t work out the first, fifth or 10th time we try. But there is meaning and value in the attempt. The experts preached realistic goals, a solid plan and good timing as critical, but none of that matters if you don’t cut yourself some slack.

That could mean not giving up on the plan just because of a slip-up along the way.

“You realize that you may not reach your goal and (should) view it as a learning opportunity instead of a failure,” said Phillips.



Having someone holding you accountable for your resolutions can help achieve them. Jonathan Borba photo/Unsplash - Jonathan Borba photo/Unsplash

Sherry said that the kindness we often extend to others who fall short of goals is just as valuable when we're the ones falling short.

"You can make it a lot further using self-compassion, as opposed to self-criticism," said Sherry. "So, when you get tripped up along the way, you're better to respond with kindness and recognition that you're not the only person who's ever struggled to quit drinking, stop smoking or eat healthier."

## **Slow and Steady**

Progress doesn't happen all at once. When Archibald starts working with a client, they're often surprised that he doesn't leave them crawling out the door after their first workout.

"They'll finish a session with me and be like, 'that was okay,'" he explained. "And I'm like, 'Yep. That's it.' You don't have to be half dead every single time you finish. You don't need a personal trainer for that. I can call you on the phone and tell you do burpees until you drop. There, you're half dead. That's simple. But doing it correctly, so you can still function in your day-to-day life and also not making you hate it, there's a lot more to it than people think."



Dr. Simon Sherry, a psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, says that the new year can be a natural point of reflection in an otherwise busy life. Contributed photo - Contributed photo

Even with smoking, Phillips said sustainable progress is built on small steps.

“A lot of my smokers, they may not quit right away, but they may reduce,” she said. “So, I’m going to start my quit medication. And, by the end of the first week, I’m going to try to get down by two cigarettes a day and then the next week I’m going to try to cut that back by a few more cigarettes and so on and so forth right? Goals that are realistic for them.”

## **Be it Resolved**

And so, to the question, do New Year’s resolutions work? No and yes ... and maybe. They are as useful as we make them, another tool for breaking up our lives into manageable chunks.

“I think we have to reflect on the nature of our life,” said Sherry. “There’s a tremendous hustle and bustle to everyday life. We are overworked and overscheduled and, so, I think it’s useful to have a pause and ponder holidays like New Year’s because it affords us a rare opportunity for self-reflection, a chance to step back and to ask yourself ‘How am I doing and how might I improve?’

“That’s an enormously relevant question, but almost a luxury to have time to entertain that in a world where we’re just too often too busy.”