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Observe these three Ps if you want to keep your New Year's resolutions

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The survival rate of a New Year's resolution is not bad if you can get past the first few days, says Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and perfectionism expert, who teaches at Dalhousie University. - 123RF Stock Photo

Perspective, persistence and a positive outlook are all key to success when it comes to making a resolution for the New Year.

"I can get behind New Year's resolutions, and I can do so in part based on available evidence, which suggests that some good comes of such resolutions," says Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and perfectionism expert, who teaches at Dalhousie University.

Sherry said about half of all adults in North America make some kind of promise to themselves every Jan. 1.

"The most common type is some kind of health behavioural change like drinking, eating or smoking," he said.

But once someone makes a resolution, what do the studies show as a success rate?

"One hint in that direction would be that oftentimes people need to make the same resolution five to 10 times before they're able to follow through on it in a meaningful way," Sherry said.

He said the resolutions to stop drinking have a 90 per cent failure rate, and smoking has an 80 per cent failure rate. Losing weight is also difficult.

Part of the problem is that the resolutions are coming at a time of year when social activities can ramp up the instances of those kinds of activities.

But the survival rate of a New Year's resolution is not bad, if you can get past the first few days, Sherry said.

"About 25 per cent of us are done after one week ... but here's where the optimism comes from. About 40 per cent of people are able to continue their resolution for at least six months. That's a fairly substantial behavioural change."

He said landmarks like a new year or a milestone birthday tend to motivate people and lead to personal aspirations for self-improvement.

New Year's Day also appeals to the notion of a clean slate, Sherry said. "We can wipe clean the imperfections of 2019 as it gives way to 2020. These kinds of temporal landmarks can motivate a behaviour."

The key to success is more than just deciding to do something, though.

"You need more than just a 'just do it' mentality that is needed here," he said.

"Part of it is monitoring your progress. With the age of the smart phone there's an app for that."

He said it's a good idea to write down outcomes and progress toward a goal, and apps take it to another level with prompts, cues and reminders.

Also important is picking goals that are important to you and your own values, and that are not suggested by others.

"If you have goals forced on you by someone other than you, it's unlikely to be successful," he said. "You want to pick goals that match who you are and how you roll and that are easier to follow through on, as opposed to a goal you're pursuing in response to external pressure like a nagging parent or spouse. People do better when they're self-motivated."

He said specific goals are better than general, which can be vague. The key is a resolution that follows the acronym SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely.

"Perfection is an enemy of goal attainment: People who set lofty, rigid and unrealistic goals often set themselves up to painfully fail," Sherry said. "They can be paralytic and overwhelm you, and you abandon the pursuit of the goals altogether."

He said that while there is a lot of advice that the best thing you can do is to set small goals and break them down into small attainable chunks, "there is a smaller number of papers that suggest that people who take a go big or go home mentality and set large goals can also make out OK, too."