

# The psychology of New Year's resolutions

Dal psychologist Dr. Simon Sherry explains why people make goals at the start of a new year

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It's a new year, the time when people start to take stock of their lives and plan to make changes to implement going forward.

Resolutions are a part of popular culture in North America, and can range from small changes to lofty goals, but some times these proposed changes don't stick, or they fail to come to fruition.

Dr. Simon Sherry, head of Dalhousie University's Personality Research Team, says that the reason people like the idea of New Year's resolutions has to do with them being observable milestones.

"When it comes to goal-setting, humans seem to prefer temporal landmarks, New Year's being one of them. It seems like we can draw some motivation or some aspiration from certain temporal landmarks," says Sherry.

"Another common one might be a birthday maybe, especially one that ends in a zero like a 30 or a 40, and it looks like we treat these temporal landmarks as a chance to wipe the slate clean."

With those solid dates and numbers, people tend to reflect, and this is why the beginning of a new year may seem like the ideal time to consider big changes in one's life.

Planning changes though, and actually taking action to commit to those changes, are two very different things.

"For all of us, whether it's New Year's or not, it's difficult to translate goals into actions," says Sherry

"It's easy to formulate a plan, it's harder to implement it, and it's especially hard to maintain a change once you have started it."

Of course, it's not all doom and gloom, according to Sherry, at least 40 per cent of people who make New Year's resolutions actually maintain those behavioural changes for at least six months.

He notes that this is a long time to sustain such a shift in action. Those who do set goals for the upcoming years can have up to three at a time on average, and 25 per cent fail within the first week. Part of the problem is the lofty goals people set for themselves.

"Many people have to make the same resolution between five and ten times before they actually lock it down and it becomes a solidified behaviour change," Sherry tells HalifaxToday.ca.

"But this may be because we often tackle notoriously difficult behaviour changes around New Year's. Stopping smoking, stopping drinking, losing weight, would be examples. These are difficult changes for humans to affect in the long-term."

Creating an action plan can help people successfully keep up their New Year's resolutions.

"It can certainly be helpful to receive prompts and cues and reminders along the way. These ever-present phones we have with us can assist in that way to remind us to change our behaviour," explains Sherry.

He says that thinking ahead to possible scenarios that may upset a person's goals and planning proper responses for how they might deal with those situations is another way to maintain resolutions.