

Make That Resolution

HOW TO ENSURE YOU MAINTAIN THAT HEALTHY HABIT



New Year's resolutions—they're easy to make but easier to break. Why is it so hard to make the healthy changes that we know can help us feel better and live longer? And why is it so hard to make them last?

Some of the most common New Year's resolutions are losing weight, getting more physical activity, eating more nutritious foods, quitting cigarettes, cutting back on alcohol, reducing stress and sleeping better. But no matter which healthy resolution you choose, research suggests that some common strategies can boost your chance of making the change a habit, a part of your daily lifestyle. Here are some solid strategies to keep in mind.

Set Realistic Goals

One challenge with New Year's resolutions is that people often set unrealistic goals. They can quickly become frustrated and give up. Therefore, any resolution to change should include small goals that are definable and accompanied by a solid plan on how you'll get to that goal.

For instance, a resolution to lose 30 pounds may seem overwhelming. Instead, try setting smaller goals of losing five pounds a month for six months. Think baby steps rather than giant leaps.

Develop An Action Plan

You might decide to walk a half hour each day to burn calories. You might stop buying vending machine snacks. Or you might limit and keep track of your daily calories. "These are specific behaviors that could help you meet your larger goal of losing 30 pounds," says Dr. Deborah Tate, an obesity and behavioral researcher at the University of North Carolina.

To make a long-lasting change in your life, prepare yourself for the challenges you might face. "Think about why you want to make the change. Is it important to you, or is it mostly influenced by others—like your doctor, your spouse or a friend?" says Tate. "Research suggests that if it's something you really want for yourself, if it's meaningful to you, you're more likely to stick to it."

Focus On The Benefits

Think of exactly how the change will enhance your life. For instance, when you stop smoking, your risk plummets for cancer, heart disease, stroke and early death. Reducing stress might cut your risk for heart disease and help you fight off germs. Even small improvements in your physical activity, weight or nutrition may help reduce your risk for disease and lengthen your life.



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Surefire Strategies To Help Healthy Habits Stick

Surround Yourself With Support

Setting up a supportive environment is another step toward success. "Think about the physical support you'll need, like the right equipment for exercise, appropriate clothing and the right kinds of foods to have at home," says Dr. Christine Hunter, a behavioral researcher and clinical psychologist at NIH. Remove items that might trip up your efforts. If you're quitting smoking, throw away your ashtrays and lighters. To improve your nutrition, put unhealthy but tempting foods on a hard-to-reach shelf, or get rid of them.

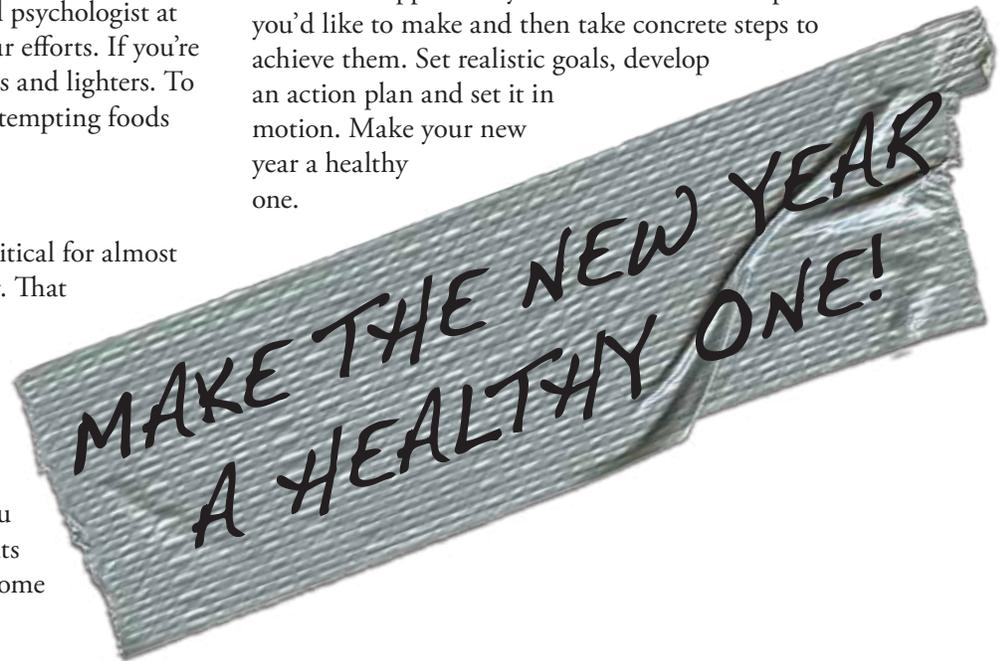
Monitor Yourself

"Self-monitoring or tracking seems to be critical for almost every sort of behavior change," says Hunter. That includes jotting down the foods you eat, keeping an exercise diary or making a record of your sleeping patterns.

Monitoring yourself might feel like a burden, but it's one of the best predictors of successful change. "Think about how you can make tracking more convenient, so it fits naturally into your life," Hunter says. For some

people, that might be a pad of paper in a purse or pocket; for others, a mobile app or a computer program.

Of course, you don't need a new year to make healthy changes; you can make them any time of the year. But New Year's is an opportunity to think about the improvements you'd like to make and then take concrete steps to achieve them. Set realistic goals, develop an action plan and set it in motion. Make your new year a healthy one.



MAKING HEALTHY CHANGES

- **Set realistic goals.** Write down the steps that will help you achieve them.
- **Plan for obstacles.** Figure out how to overcome them. Don't give up just because you've slipped.
- **Track your progress.** A journal or diary is one of the best tools for helping you stay focused and recover from slip-ups.
- **Get help.** Ask friends and family for support. Consider enrolling in a class or program.
- **Reward yourself.** Give yourself a healthy treat when you've achieved a small goal or milestone.
- **Add variety.** Keep things interesting by adding new activities or expanding your goals to make them more challenging.