

Do your New Year resolutions stand a chance?

By: Stephen Clasper

Very soon now, fitness centres will begin to look much quieter. As the first flush of enthusiasm to get fit starts to fade and our hurriedly set New Year resolutions begin to look less interesting, the gap between visits to the gym lengthens. Why does this happen? Well, most people make their resolutions in too much of a hurry and without getting their intention right or planning properly.

Resolutions can work, but most have basic design faults. Two essential components are having a definite purpose and a passionate desire to achieve it.

1. Be precise about what you want to achieve and why it's important to you. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Put another way, what do you really want, rather than what do you think you can achieve? And, is this your goal or what someone else wants for you?

The more precise the goal, the more likely you are to reach it. "I want to lose weight" or "I want to be fit" may sound good, but how will you know when you're there? How much weight or how fit, before you're done? The more vague your goal, the greater the risk you will give up early when you're facing your first big challenge. Instead, set a specific weight that you want to be by a particular date and you will have a target to chase and something to measure along the way.

2. Use positive language, preferably what are known as "toward" words such as "be fit and trim" in place of "lose weight". Generating a "toward" motivation will help you stick to the goal when the going gets tough. However, you will need to balance your enthusiasm by thinking about and then preparing for any potential obstacles.

If you're motivated generally to move "away from" things you don't like (wanting to lose weight or give up smoking), you may have to focus harder on your goal, because you may be pre-disposed to continually look for obstacles. You may also find it difficult to manage your priorities for the goal or become discouraged too easily for not losing weight fast enough. Try instead to imagine how you will look when you succeed and ask yourself how well the activity serves that image.

3. Choose your words carefully when setting the goal. Instead of using want, ought or should, say "I choose to". Removing the element of obligation, even if it's self-imposed, will keep you going when it all seems too hard or boring. When you set this positive intention, be sure to write it down. Committing your intention to paper, where you can see it from time to time, will keep your mind focused on it.

4. Form a clear picture in your mind of how you will look when you've reached your goal. Research shows that visualization works. When top athletes visualize running 100 metres, the same muscles fire and in the same sequence as if they were actually running the race. Researchers monitoring people who visualized themselves performing particular exercises in the gym recorded similar muscle growth as in others who actually worked out.

5. Forget the “no pain, no gain” model. There is no evidence that this works over the long term, but there is evidence that having fun while working toward your goal does. Acknowledge your progress along the way by giving yourself the occasional treat. And above all, remain flexible. Unexpected obstacles are bound to arise and you won’t want to be derailed by sticking too rigidly to your plan.

6. Find someone who has the same goal. A partner will encourage you to get to the gym on those days when you would rather stay in bed. But, choose carefully. If you need plenty of planning every time you start on your goal, you may end up procrastinating, so choose someone who is eager to get on with it. In turn, you will encourage them to think about organizing themselves properly.

7. If your motivation generally is internal and you “just know” how well you’re doing, you will find it easier to stay on track, but you will still need to form a clear picture of what it will feel like when you’re on the way to completing your goal. That will give you an additional measure to feed your internal judge. If your motivation is external and you rely on feedback from others on how well you’re doing, find a couple of close friends whose judgment you trust and ask them to tell you from time to time how they think you’re doing. That will be just enough to keep you going.

Above all, have fun!

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