

STOP! Before you make that Resolution!

■ by Melinda Hammond, PsyD, LCPC



Every January, millions of Americans will make New Year's Resolutions. They will lose weight, save more money, get involved in church, be nicer to the dog...Every February, thousands of gyms, bank accounts, churches and dog dishes will stand empty.

What gives? Truthfully, New Year's Resolutions just don't work. Why?

- **They have a specific, rare start date.** What happens when (on January 3rd), you stumble while trying to accomplish a resolution? Let's say you accidentally eat all the leftover Christmas cookies. If you've waited all year to start that diet on January 1st, it's psychologically difficult to start all the way over on January 4th. Instead, our minds tell us "so much for that...we can try again next year..."
- **They are too broad.** A general New Year's resolution like "I will get organized" is huge and daunting. It's so broad: how will you know that you're making progress and at what point are you organized?
- **They are not measurable.** How do you measure closeness to God or niceness to the dog? Without the ability to measure your progress, it is easy to get sidetracked, discouraged or overwhelmed.
- **There are too many.** On the plus side, January 1st is a fresh start for many people. On the negative, trying to fix everything in your life all at the same time is a huge task. There are only 24 hours in a day, and you are only one person. So if you resolve to do everything, chances are high you will feel like you've done nothing.

This is not to say that New Year's Resolutions are all bad, or that no one should make them. Nor does it mean that no one accomplishes their New Year's resolutions. But relying solely on your yearly resolutions is not a great way to make permanent change in your life.

So how can we make real changes in our lives?

- **Set your start date NOW.** Start today. Start in this moment. Start as soon as you can. If you struggle today, start over tomorrow. You can only act in one moment: this one.
- **Make a concrete, measurable goal.** Rather than "I will organize my house" maybe "I will get rid of 10 items a day" or "I will assign everything in the kitchen a place" By making your goal something you can measure, and something concrete, you can more easily track your progress and evaluate how far you've come.
- **Break down your big goal into smaller goals.** Goals seem less daunting if you only have to tackle a little bit at a time. A weight loss goal can be broken down many ways: "I will lose a pound this week" "I will eat vegetables 3 times each day" "I will exercise 30 minutes, 3 times per week"
- **Measure your progress!** Make yourself a sticker chart. Keep track of miles run, minutes spent organizing, days where you read the Bible. By measuring your progress, you can see what you've accomplished, and become more motivated for future accomplishments.
- **Reward yourself!** You are much more likely to succeed when you reward yourself for your goals!
- **Know that you will fail. And give yourself permission to start again, regardless of the date.** No one is perfect. We all fall short. If you accept that you will fail at some point, it makes success even sweeter, and mistakes less intimidating. It also makes it much easier to pick yourself up and try again.
- **Don't try to solve all of your problems at once.** You can't fix your relationship with your in-laws, lose 30 pounds, organize your house, save a million dollars and recycle all at the same time. Try one thing at a time, change one habit at a time. You can always start working on other goals in April.
Or June.



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