

# On Resolve

## The Odds Are Against You

In 1987, a team of psychologists conducted a study in which they monitored the New Year's resolutions of 275 people. After one week, the psychologists found that 92 percent of the people were keeping their resolutions; after two weeks, we have no idea what happened, because the psychologists had quit monitoring.

—Dave Barry

Resolutions are the laughingstock of the personal-improvement universe. Only twenty percent of resolvers follow through with their New Year's vows; indeed such intentions are often little more than pre-justification for holiday excess. Whether or not they are motivated by a holiday or special occasion, however, at their most basic resolutions are commitments to achieve goals, and it **is** possible to successfully identify and attain goals. Paul J. Meyers, a pioneer of the self-improvement industry, famously stated that goals should be SMART—Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Tangible—but these adjectives comprise only a handful of the dynamics that characterize successful resolutions. The entire Resolution Tracking System was developed according to these dynamics, and this pamphlet outlines them for your edification. Personal change is no cakewalk, but with the Resolution Tracking System you can have resolve and eat it too.

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# Introduction: Revolutionary Habit Formation

When we look at living creatures from an outward point of view, one of the first things that strikes us is that they are bundles of habits.

—William James

Because resolutions generally entail an ongoing lifestyle shift, the implied goal of most resolutions is habit formation. Habits—repeated behaviors that require little or no thought—provide freedom from deliberation. Whether adopting a new positive habit or ceasing an old negative one, initiation can be unbearably painful. Once the new habit's actions (or inactions or replacement actions) have been repeated and reinforced over a few weeks or months, however, the behaviors gather their own momentum and come to feel automatic.

Habit implementation promises an easier future—after weeks of resistance to seemingly thankless exercise, you will one day punch the alarm clock at 6:30 A.M., swing your legs out of bed, and take a groggy two-mile walk without thinking about it. After a habit has integrated and taken hold, momentum can be maintained rather than mustered.

According to pioneering psychologist William James, one of the great philosophers of habit, the goal is to “make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy” by harnessing the power of repetition. “For this we must make automatic and habitual . . . as many useful actions as we can.” Not only can habit formation effect personal change, it frees us to engage in loftier pursuits: “The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work. . . . Only when habits of order are formed can we advance to really interesting fields of action. . . . Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society.”

The sad truth is that we spend more time thinking about the things we'd like to change about ourselves than we do actually changing them, a stalemate that impedes positive progress and diminishes mental well-being. According to James,

There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation. Full half the time of such a man goes to the deciding, or regretting, of matters

which ought to be so ingrained in him as practically not to exist for his consciousness at all.

Indeed the energy we spend on dread and self-loathing could better be applied to actually **doing** the thing we're worrying about.

Sometimes these thoughts do lead to action. From studies of individuals struggling to overcome such addictions as smoking, psychologist James O. Prochaska and his colleagues theorized that the process of significant behavioral change broke down into five stages: Pre-Contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance. In the Pre-Contemplation stage, the individual has just become aware that a change must be made and possibly begins investigating it. In the Contemplation phase, the individual has decided to make the change but has not committed to anything concrete. During Preparation, the individual makes plans for the change, setting tangible goals and deadlines. During Action, the individual implements the plans determined during the Preparation stage, exercising behavioral modification for the first time. The Action stage evolves into the Maintenance stage as the new behaviors become habitual. Prochaska found, however, that the journey through these stages was rarely direct—many individuals cycled through the stages multiple times before ultimately succeeding. In one of Prochaska's

studies, only forty percent arrived at the Maintenance stage on their first try; seventeen percent finally triumphed after more than six attempts.

Change hurts because we are creatures of momentum and inertia. When we are in motion we tend to stay in motion, and when we are at rest, we tend to watch television. Because change is so punishing, we procrastinate to delay the pain of transition. So difficult is the onset of change that we are far more likely to quit early than late. Yet the Maintenance stage lies directly beyond the hurdle of revolution. By starting and stopping resolutions over and over again, we consign ourselves to repeating the worst part of personal change—the beginning. Success begets success, lapse begets lapse. “The need of securing success at the outset is imperative,” wrote James. “Failure at first is apt to dampen the energy of all future attempts, whereas past experience of success nerves one to future vigor. . . . He who every day makes a fresh resolve is like one who, arriving at the edge of the ditch he is to leap, forever stops and returns for a fresh run.”

Consideration and momentum lie at the heart of successful resolutions. Just as a car must use its engine before it can efficiently coast, so must we apply muscle to our initial motivation. “In the acquisition of a new habit, or the leaving off of an old one,” wrote James,

we must take care to launch ourselves with as strong and decided an initiative as possible. Accumulate all the possible circumstances which shall reenforce the right motives; put yourself assiduously in conditions that encourage the new way; make engagements incompatible with the old; take a public pledge, if the case allows; in short, envelop your resolution with every aid you know. This will give your new beginning such a momentum that the temptation to break down will not occur as soon as it otherwise might; and every day during which a breakdown is postponed adds to the chances of its not occurring at all.

Resolutionary success is a front-loaded proposition—the more effort you engage in the beginning, the better your chances to sustain change in the long run.

Indeed there are some resolutions that entail more targeted, finite accomplishments, such as changing jobs, saving for a house, returning to school, or relocating. Because any long-term, worthwhile goal requires a marathon mentality, however, the principles of habit formation can also ease resolutions with fixed endpoints. Limited or infinite, near or far, progress arises not from disparate grand gestures but from tiny repeated actions.

# Part I: How to Make a Resolution

## 1. Commit

If you choose your resolutions indiscriminately or arbitrarily, deluding yourself with fantasies of magical transformation, you will most likely fail time and again. Successful resolutions require commitment, and real commitment calls for thought, timing, and self-awareness. Select, prioritize, and pace your resolutions carefully so that you can wholeheartedly commit to them.

- Choose resolutions that are meaningful to you. Resolutions should arise from your own desires, not from external forces.
- The more challenging the resolution, the stronger your initial commitment must be.
- Feel excitement and enthusiasm when you think about achieving your resolution. If you feel only dread, reexamine the resolution and your commitment to it. Goals that feel like punishment almost never succeed.
- Think before committing to a resolution with a history of failure. Why hasn't it worked in the past? Consider and modify the resolution, or you will most likely set yourself up to lapse again.

- Make your resolutions definable, measurable, and attainable rather than vague, relative, and unrealistic. To fully commit to a resolution, you must believe you can do it or you'll fail before you begin.
- Consider the context and timing of your resolutions. Don't take on too many resolutions simultaneously, embrace conflicting goals, or launch a resolution at an inconvenient or challenging time.

## **2. Believe**

Confidence is absolutely critical to resolutionary success. If you don't have faith that you can achieve a goal, you will undermine yourself and throw in the towel.

- Concoct or rephrase resolutions so that you can believe in them. The "Serenity Prayer," popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous, asks "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Kenny Rogers put it like this: "You got to know when to hold 'em / Know when to fold 'em / Know when to walk away / Know when to run."
- Nurture your confidence by setting yourself up for success rather than failure—

don't fix your sights too high, tackle an overly abstract proposition, or take on a challenge that's clearly infeasible.

- Don't blindly follow the latest headlines or bestsellers, AKA if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.
- Avoid perfectionist, all-or-nothing thinking. No matter how powerful your resolve, for example, you will most certainly eat chocolate again one day. If your resolution includes the words "always" or "never," you will probably fail. Successful resolutions occur in real life as ongoing processes, advanced not by perfection or abstinence but by a preponderance of manageable tasks.
- Reach out. Talk to people who have personally accomplished your goal and ask them how they did it. Seek professional support. Tell people what you're trying to do. Others' experiences will arm you with useful tools and hope, while others' belief in you will help you believe in yourself.
- Think positively. It's a little hackneyed, but cliches don't get that way because they're untrue. Confidence matters, and you can boost yours by using mental repetition and reinforcement, visualizing the rewards of your resolution and recognizing your own positive actions.

### 3. Prepare and Plan

One of the reasons why New Year's resolutions fail so frequently is because people don't actually consider, prepare, or plan before January. For the optimum possibility of success, resolutions must be considered before the last minute.

- Create a resolution game plan.
- Become knowledgeable about your resolution by consuming information and by talking to others.
- Create a network of support for your resolution, including family, friends, colleagues, and professionals.
- Prepare yourself psychologically. Change can be scary and stressful. New rituals and abandoned crutches may depress you and render you vulnerable. You will miss, you will crave, you will resent. The more significance the resolution holds, the more psychological change you will experience.
- Consider timing and environment. If you feel especially motivated by a special occasion such as a birthday, anniversary, or New Year's, by all means harness its significance. If the timing is arbitrary, however, and doesn't take into account life circumstances, your motivation could flag quickly. Make resolution timing work for you—for example, quit smoking during a

change of scene such as a vacation rather than during a stressful period at work.

- Formulate contingency plans and coping strategies for stresses, challenges, and lapses. Counting on perfection is nothing more than denial or folly. Ensure a greater chance of revolutionary success by predicting vulnerabilities and preparing yourself.
- Devise tangible incentives and rewards for success.

#### **4. Make It Concrete**

Actions constitute the difference between a goal and a wish, so a resolution's path must be paved with concrete stepping stones. Break your goal down into action steps, the smaller the better, and execute them until they become habit.

- For each of your resolutions, ask yourself “What? When? Where? Who? How?” (By the time you've committed to a resolution, you should already have answered “Why?”) For example, “Be the best father ever” could translate into “Spend an hour playing with my kids after dinner every evening.” Rather than simply vowing to save money, determine to set aside five percent of your paycheck. “Read a book every month” is more active than “Get, like, real smart.”

- Divide your actions into bite-sized chunks. If the actions are too big or vague, they probably won't get done. William James said, "As we become permanent drunkards by so many separate drinks, so we become saints in the moral, and authorities and experts in the practical and scientific spheres, by so many separate acts and hours of work."
- Create realistic short-, medium-, and long-term deadlines for your goal actions.

## **5. Start Strong**

While initiating a new habit, vigilance and action are especially important. Studies show that a new habit sets tentative foundations during the first three weeks, with milestones of strength at three months, six months, and one year. Initial momentum and effort, while difficult to muster, will help pull you through the consuming and painful onset of change. Over time, new actions will ease into habitual behavior.

- Don't make exceptions at the beginning. According to William James, "Never suffer an exception to occur till the new habit is securely rooted in your life. Each lapse is like the letting fall of a ball of string which one is carefully winding up; a single slip undoes more than a great many turns will

wind again.” While flexibility may help you maintain a goal in the long run, at the beginning it will bring vagueness to your resolve, inhibit your habit formation, and undermine your confidence.

- Support yourself at the outset, when your resolution is most fragile. Until it takes root, protect your resolution as if it were a delicate seedling.
- Don't wait for motivation. Thomas Edison famously concluded that “Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.” Successful resolution achievement is no different—it is the accumulation of many small, concrete acts precipitated not by in-the-moment motivation but by sheer effort.

## **6. Cultivate Process**

Any substantial life change is a process rather than a one-time push. Your resolutions are active, living entities; to stay with them, you will need flexibility, patience, and pacing.

- Focus on overall success rather than on grand gestures or small slips.
- Track your progress. Many studies note that progress logs contribute to resolutionary success. Close monitoring keeps your

mind prioritized and your resolution alive. Review your progress to underscore your triumphs, identify your slips, and continually reaffirm your commitment.

- Make your new habits sticky by associating them with consistent rituals. Just as a cigarette goes perfectly with morning coffee or a bowl of ice cream tastes great just before bed, you can make a new, positive habit sticky by connecting it to consistent rituals. You can also unstick a negative habit by substituting new rituals.
- Make your revolutionary actions pleasurable. Hike in a beautiful place. Save cash in a jar so you can watch it grow. Mix it up a little.

## **7. Recover from Lapses**

Everybody stumbles. As with life itself, what matters is resilience and perseverance.

- Do not use lapses as excuses to give up resolutions. One lapse does not a failed resolution make. The more you fail, the worse you feel. In order to step off the failure treadmill, you must get back on the wagon.
- Forgive yourself, then keep on trucking. Attempt to understand your lapses so as to prevent or accommodate them in the future, but don't dwell on them.

## **8. Acknowledge Success**

Celebrating achievement is almost as important as recovering from lapses. Overly high expectations, deeply ingrained self-loathing, and impatience can make it difficult to recognize your own achievements. Why not celebrate a five-pound weight loss rather than chastising yourself for having gotten so fat in the first place? To bolster confidence and motivate future achievements it's important to applaud your own success.

- Use rewards along the way to provide incentive and motivation.
- Think about positive steps you've taken rather than condemning yourself for what you haven't done.
- Take time to contemplate your success and pat yourself on the back before moving on to the next milestone or resolution.

# Part II: How to Use the Resolution Tracking System

**1. THE RESOLUTION BRIEF** is your mission statement, a place to outline your resolution honestly and concretely. You don't have to implement the resolution right away or fill out the entire card in one sitting—Resolution Briefs can exist in all stages of development and commitment. By the time you start a resolution, however, you should have filled out all but the very last section, Result. The card's sections are as follows:

- **Contemplation:** Set priorities, categorize, and examine the resolution.
- **Commitment:** Envision yourself having achieved the goal, and set action dates.
- **Preparation:** Think about ways to support yourself in achieving your goal.
- **Implementation:** Create a path of concrete actions to get you to your goal.
- **Result:** At important milestones, review your Resolution Brief and determine whether it's time for a conclusion or a recommitment.

The Resolution Briefs should be used as maps to chart a deliberate course of personal change. When you're feeling doubt about reaching a goal, review and contemplate your Resolution Brief. By reminding and prioritizing, the Resolution Brief will help keep your eye on the prize.

**2. THE RESOLUTION LOG** is the place to track your resolution once you're ready to implement it.

- On each Resolution Log page, track one resolution.
- For the first three weeks of your resolution, you will track progress daily. Some studies suggest that new habits take root during this time period, which is also when lapses are most likely to occur.
- Plan your rewards (archived in the Reward Log) to coincide with milestones small and large.
- After twenty-one days, you will monitor your resolution on a weekly basis.
- The three-month mark is another significant milestone in habit formation, so after twelve weeks have passed you will monitor your maintenance on a monthly basis until you have achieved one full year of success.

**3. THE LAPSE LOG** helps you examine and understand your stumbles as well as protect against repeat slip-ups.

- Each lapse merits two pages of analysis.
- Honesty is key when attempting to characterize and understand a lapse.
- Recommit—persist, persevere, progress. Or maybe it's just not working. In either case, be decisive and truthful with yourself.

**4. THE REWARD LOG** functions as a running record of motivational treats to help reinforce habits. Some will be small—a massage, a new CD, an extra hour to sleep in. Others will be tied to your resolution's success, like purchasing something grand with money that would otherwise have been spent on cigarettes, or buying a new pair of jeans to reward fitness goals.

- Use rewards as incentives, to lift your spirits and provide a light at the tunnel's end.
- Some rewards can repeat—for example, a weekly manicure to reward nail-biting cessation.
- For the ultimate reward, acknowledge your hard work and amplify your confidence with the suitable-for-framing **“CERTIFICATE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT.”**

## Epilogue: You've Got Resolve!

If you've read all the way through this pamphlet, there's no doubt you've got at least **some** resolve. At the very least, you are an informed participant, fully apprised of time-proven revolutionary tips and pitfalls. The odds may be against you, but awareness, knowledge, and helpful tools now equip you for success. Let your revolutionary triumphs be tracked!

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