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I Really Thought I Could Change This Time...

by

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So you made that New Year's resolution to stop buying those scratch tickets, to quit smoking cigarettes or getting drunk, to climb on that treadmill, or to start that new fix-it project. You seem motivated, you're pumped—this time it's going to happen! Okay, so those around you are chuckling... That won't deter you. They're shaking their heads and muttering sarcastic remarks. Don't they see how you really, absolutely, mean it this time?

And it happened again—oh, what's the use?

The British Journal of Sports Medicine has found that only 22% of those who begin an exercise or weight-loss program on January 1 are still engaged in it by the end of the year. Change is difficult, and the motivation to change is a process, not a one-time event. Simply deciding that "it's time for a change" will not be sufficient to maintain the commitment.

Resistance to change can be related to several powerful variables. The most common saboteur is, simply, fear. Not only does one feel uncomfortable having to surrender to failure, but it can be outright embarrassing knowing that others have watched us engage in this failure.

One's motivation to stay on track can quickly dissipate when your group of friends tries to convince you that you do not have a problem in need of change. "You? You don't have a drinking problem—come on, I'm buying." Conversely, changing solely to please others usually does not work, since there may be a self-deceptive wish that if you placate them for some period of time, eventually everything will return to the status quo.

If you do not succeed with your goals, are you a failure? Absolutely not—however, if you view the challenge you have set for yourself in a rigid black-or-white manner, it will be difficult to label yourself in ways other than "winner" or "loser". The experience can be seen as an opportunity to learn. After suffering a setback (relapse), it's important to maintain the view that any improvement, no matter how tiny, is a positive step in the right direction. You own that success, and no one, not anyone, can take that away from you!

There has been a significant amount of information written on stages of change and motivation to do so. However, whether you follow a scientifically approved body of research or read a self-help book that was euphorically recommended by a friend, you may need several attempts to reach or maintain the goal successfully. With that in mind, here are some pointers to help you serve as your own "coach" and reduce the possibilities of self-sabotage:

- Be totally honest with yourself. Do you really want what you are aiming for—is this for you or just to please someone else?

Continued on next page

January, 2003

- Describe the goal in positive terms. Rather than “I’m going to smoke less,” think of the process as “I’m going to improve my lung capacity.”
- Share your goals with those who are understanding and support your efforts. These are folks who will help you get back on the horse if you fall off, not ridicule you for riding in the first place.
- Identify the specific person, place, or thing that may have caused you to lose focus. Once identified, you need to explore how to minimize the presence or influence of these “saboteurs”.
- Imagine the payoff. What will your life be like once you have achieved these goals?
- Be kind toward yourself. If you experience a setback, be optimistic, give yourself permission to forgive yourself, and begin to evaluate the process. There are no quick fixes.

Rather than saving up for one whopper of a New Year’s Resolution, it may be helpful to identify a number of smaller goals. The more experience you gather feeling good about attaining these smaller goals may just be the impetus you need to accomplish the more advanced goals. Remember—being patient and realistic will allow you to stay on target.