

Lose weight. Do more exercise. Snack less. Save money. Sound familiar? Of course it does. All too often we start the new year by loading our metaphorical plates with a large helping of enticing goals from the smorgasbord of life. The trouble is, the weight of expectation we place on ourselves can be so great, our resolve inevitably buckles. According to British psychologist Richard Wiseman, who conducted a survey of more than 3000 people, for 88% of us, our best January intentions fizzle out like a wet wick on a firework. But if you want your year to start as you mean to continue, follow these surprisingly simple tips to make it happen.

Manage your expectations

Forget the typical new year directives: "I will do this; I must do that." Instead, be upfront with yourself by facing reality. No matter your goal, whether it's joining the gym or saving money, the only person accountable for your success—or failure—is you. (Yes, YOU!) "Once you're 40+, chances are you've become so used to making resolutions, and often failing to achieve desired outcomes, part of you doesn't really believe you can do it," explains Marie Rowland, *Prevention* adviser, psychotherapist and director at Talking-Matters (talking-matters.com). "It's easy to become goal-fatigued." By altering the meaning of achievement, life becomes brighter. "Rather than lament all the things you didn't do, why not ponder the great things you did? They may not be the obvious successes, but the more subtle achievements like creating tighter bonds with your partner or kids, are amazing outcomes too."

Know that change can be as good as a holiday

First the disclaimer: if the sort of change you're making is swapping your usual salad sandwich for a cheese and pickle baguette, chances are it's not going to be the life equivalent of a Caribbean getaway. But finding a new focus that truly enhances your day-to-day? Welcome to your very own tropical island. The key to achieving sustainable positive shifts this year is simple: plan

for what you truly want to achieve rather than what you think you should, says Rowland.

Case in point? "One of the all-time recurring resolutions for women is to shed unwanted kilos," she says. "So why not come at resolutions in a different way? Instead of 'losing weight', try setting a goal where the collateral outcome is losing weight. By making the process something you love—such as walking, dancing or yoga—the outcome becomes far more achievable. Work out what will make your life more meaningful and will provide greater fulfilment, then go for it."

Sometimes, it's simply the way you look at things that makes the difference between what is and isn't achievable. "Don't quantify your resolution," adds Rowland. "Swap 'lose 10 kilograms by March' with something more tangible like 'walk around the block every day' or 'cut sugar from tea and coffee'. Suddenly, the pressure is taken right off and life kicks in."

Remember: failure is a matter of perspective

How many times have you vowed on January 1 to run three times a week and cut down on carbs, only to find yourself, a few weeks in, slumped on the couch, eating chips straight from the bag? Most of us have been there. According to Craig Harper, author of *Pull Your Finger Out: 101 Ways to Stop Wasting Time & Start Living Your Real Life* (Penguin), the key to success is refusing to fail. "There are no universal failures, only individual experiences. One person's failure will be another person's lesson," he says. "For the most part, failure is a myth. A self-created phenomenon. It doesn't exist until we make it a reality."

Which mean you're only unsuccessful if you believe you are. Picture this: you decided to go running every week. Four weeks in and that's dwindled to once a month. Should you beat yourself up over it? No, says Harper. "When we label an experience a lesson or opportunity, we avoid the destructive self talk and in doing so, keep our head, heart and actions in a more productive, positive and solution-focused place." Learn the lesson, dust yourself off and start again.

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The percentage of people who are optimistic about achieving their New Year's resolutions, according to a recent UK study

Own your intentions

It's not surprising one of the most common complaints Rowland hears from women over 40 whose resolutions have fallen by the wayside is: "I don't have the time or the energy." Sure, we sometimes put other people first and our own needs last. But this is exactly why Rowland says it's vital to get to the bottom of what's driving your motivation. "More often than not, your motivation is built on other people's expectations —peers or your partner. So the willingness doesn't come from within but instead from external forces. As a result, I always say whatever you choose, do it for yourself." Easier said than done? Perhaps. But the true test of sustainability is to make your resolutions realistic and manageable. "If your resolutions mean that you have to traverse a road of deprivation, uncompromising discipline and require drive that is relentless, then you need to ask yourself: is this a realistic goal?" explains Rowland. "Make sure your resolution matters to you. Don't let it be driven by guilt or fear, but from a place of inspiration and joy."

Turn your hopes into habits

Want to quit smoking or stop nail biting? Go straight to the source: your brain. Neuroscientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US have found that a small area of the brain's prefrontal cortex (the part that regulates thoughts and planning) is also the control centre that governs which habits are switched on at any given point. This discovery is a major boon for those trying to kick bad habits. How? It shows that although many habits are deeply ingrained into your psyche, the brain's habit-forming control centre can actually be shut off.

"We've always thought of habits as being inflexible, but this suggests you can have flexible habits, in some sense," according to Jane Taylor, a professor of psychiatry and psychology at Yale University. So, it's possible that if you practise them enough, all the things you've dreamed about doing may one day be as easy as tying your shoelaces. The outcome? You'll be happier, healthier, wealthier and wiser for many years to come. No resolutions required. **2**



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