

Preparing for the New Year: Maintaining Your Mental Health

Time to pack away the decorations, organize the home and look ahead to a brand new year! Looking forward to the next 365 days often brings about hopes of new beginnings, the potential to do better and perhaps the resolve to tackle both new and existing aspirations.

Setting Goals and New Year's Resolutions

> ***Only 8% of people who make new year's resolution keep them.*** (1)

Whether you're motivated to start exercising, lose weight, quit smoking or get promoted at work, setting goals and making resolutions can be an exciting – and sometimes daunting – prospect.

Goals VS Resolutions

Your goals should inspire and motivate, not evoke shame and create a fear of failure. Mustering up the resolve to alter or stop deeply ingrained habits can be really difficult. One way to approach difficult changes is to set goals instead of making resolutions. Why?

- **Fluid, realistic and attainable steps.** A goal can be broken down into manageable steps, big or small, according to your feelings, and your ability to respond to challenge.
- **That celebration of accomplishment.** Each step you achieve serves as a win and a very effective motivator to keep going.
- **Perception.** A goal *feels* looser, more forgiving and feasible when compared to a hard and fast resolution, helping you to stay positive on your journey.
- **Scope and practice.** You create, break down and reach realistic goals every day, without realizing it. The process of establishing, planning and executing your new year's goals is a process you're a pro at already - and therefore more likely to succeed.

Whether you make goals or stick to traditional new year's resolutions these tips will increase your odds for success:

Think of what you're adding, not taking away. Psychologically, it's easier to add rather than stop a behaviour. Re-frame or reposition your thoughts, say "go to yoga" instead of "stop skipping the gym", or "eat healthy" rather than "cut the junk food". This will allow you to feel less deprived and more inspired.

Write 'em down so you can see 'em. By the end of January, over 80% of us forget our new year's resolutions, or lose the willpower to sustain them, says Lisa Ferentz, clinical social worker and psychotherapist.(2) Writing down your resolutions makes them tangible, visible things in your world. The University of Hertfordshire's Professor Richard Wiseman suggests that keeping your goals to yourself to ease the fear of failure makes it all too easy to fall back into old habits. (3) Displaying your goals someplace you'll see them often keeps them at the forefront of your mind and your intentions.

Evaluate past obstacles. Your history and even your failures can help identify challenges and triggers that may derail or impede you from achieving your resolutions. Create a plan on how you'll reduce or avoid these obstacles to increase the likelihood of sticking to your plans.

Ask for help. When you need extra support, reach out to family, friends, local groups, or even professional coaches and/or counsellors.

De-construct the big ones. Break down extra challenging goals (i.e.: "get fit") into smaller steps you can tackle with confidence (i.e.: do 20 minutes on the treadmill, daily) so you have a firm plan to follow.

Try, try again. If your resolution was to call mom weekly and you haven't, don't beat yourself up about it...just pick up the phone and start your new ritual again. We are not perfect. January 1st may be the first day of the year, but every day is an opportunity to reset and resolve to move towards your goals.

Set the stage for success. Create an environment that encourages, not undermines. If you've decided to run every day, lay out your sneakers the night before. Cutting sweets? Replace sugary pantry goodies with healthier options. Professor Mike Evans, who studies the science behind successful life changes, notes that minimizing temptation and using your high willpower moments to prepare for your low-power ones (3) is a super strategy for successful change.

Reward yourself. Celebrate your small wins as well as the big ones to add some fun and incentive to your process.

Re-engaging With Friends and Family

The holidays are often associated with interpersonal bonding but can also be an isolating time where the hustle and bustle take precedence over precious quality time. Re-engaging with friends and family can be a wonderfully rewarding way to start the new year.

Before you begin...

Evaluate how engaged you are...with yourself.

Disengagement can bring on feelings of helplessness, despair (4) and a paralyzing lethargy. Unsurprisingly, this can also exacerbate feelings of loneliness, making it hard to effectively re-engage with others. To up your energy and re-engage with yourself:

- **Get physical.** Exercise isn't just a great physical healer, it stirs up all those feel-good endorphins in the brain too.
- **Volunteer**. Fantastic for your mental health and personal empowerment, helping out in your community is an excellent practice for connecting with others.
- **Re-visit what you love.** Try engaging in a favourite hobby. If immersing yourself in your faith makes your heart sing, commit to prayer or visiting your place of worship. Avid learner? Take a class to get your neurons firing.
- **Pamper yourself.** With relaxation, meditation or even a long, warm bath. Making time to care for yourself is worth the effort.

After you've taken the time to re-engage with yourself, you can move onto doing the same with your family and friends. Some great ways to start:

Create rituals like movie or game nights, weekly dinner dates or running together.

Find activities you all enjoy and make a point of doing them together. Gardening, entertainment, exercise, sports and even group volunteering are terrific choices.

Bond with hellos and goodbyes. "The Happiness Project" author, Gretchen Rubin enthusiastically touts the emotional satisfaction of engaging in warm, heartfelt greetings and farewells (5) - take advantage of them, every time.

Be truly present. Ditch distractions and devices to keep focus on one another and make the most of your time together.

Support one another. When your kids call for advice, or a friend or co-worker needs help, make the time to be there and lend your support.

Being Realistic

Hyped for the possibilities of the new year? Great! Optimism and positivity are powerful forces. Anxious and stressed about what's to come? That's okay too - you aren't alone.

However if you're feeling the new year may create too much pressure between robust expectations, good intentions, and hopes for change, the potential to feel like a failure is present. Remaining realistic ensures moving forward with a sense of purpose and comfort. To do this:

Decide what you really want. When setting goals, making resolutions or thinking about tasks that need attending, get a true, specific sense of what you're hoping to accomplish. If you want to "be happier", consider exactly what "happiness" means to you, and what steps you need to put in place to make that happen. For example, if happiness to you is a closer relationship with your spouse, plan for some special activities to get that ball rolling.

Identify your strengths and weaknesses. Honestly evaluate your financial, emotional, physical, even professional strong suits and shortcomings to realistically put your situation in focus (and help begin transforming your weaknesses into strengths!)

Be mindful. Consciously taking notice and actively pondering all of the moving parts - or one particular area - of your life is a simple yet profound tool that allows for a deeper understanding of – and ability to alter – almost anything in it more effectively.

Focus on the facts, not the emotions or "what ifs" of your life or circumstances. Try writing down what you know to be true; sometimes, seeing things objectively is easier when put down on paper.

Reflect on what really makes you happy. It's common to make lofty goals and imagine how much better things will be upon attaining them, but often, the things you have access to right now are what truly brings the most happiness. Take notice of where you find your joy – it may be in small, everyday activities or interactions like walking the dog or spending time with your kids, going for a run or chatting with friends. If that's the case, a deeper sense of happiness in the new year might just be possible by making small adjustments (or more family and friend time!). That said…

Don't be afraid to dream big. There's nothing quite as magical and uniquely human, as setting your sights on a personal goal, working for it, then watching it become reality. So embrace those ambitions that make your heart go pitter-pat while also embracing realistic goal setting as a tool to make good on them. Do your research, make a plan with actionable steps and patiently, yet persistently, move toward that dream!

No matter what you're hoping for in the new year, preparing for it with a renewed focus on your mental health is a fantastic way to lay the best foundation possible.

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