

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Want New Year's Resolutions That Work? Think Mini-Goals!

from the American Counseling Association

Yes, we all make New Year's resolutions, and yes, we all usually break them almost immediately. But making resolutions that work isn't all that difficult and can pay real benefits. Resolutions usually mean positive changes, and these are good things.

While a broken New Year's resolution might not seem critical to you, for some people it actually can be. From a mental health perspective, broken resolutions are sometimes harmful because they can have us seeing ourselves as failures, falling short of our goals. A broken New Year's resolution is another example of how weak we are, helping to erode self-confidence and self-esteem.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't make any New Year's resolutions. They offer a wonderful opportunity to examine where you are and to set goals for the things you'd like to change.

The most important element for good resolutions is to make them realistic. You're not going to lose 25 pounds by the end of January or immediately look like an Olympic athlete if it's been years since you've been near the gym.

One way to make successful resolutions is to set realistic mileposts. This means breaking big tasks into smaller, more manageable units... "mini-goals."

If you're resolving to lose weight, forget the number of pounds you want to shed and instead focus on moving to a healthier diet that will naturally lead to weight loss. Maybe your first mini-goal is to cut out one high calorie food each day or week and to replace it with a healthier fruit or vegetable.

If your resolution is to exercise more, start slowly with an initial goal, say walking 15 minutes each day, that you know you can achieve. Similarly, if it's smoking that you want to stop, maybe your first goal is to cut by 10% the number of cigarettes you smoke each day, or to contact your doctor or local hospital to learn about smoking cessation programs and stop-smoking aids.

When you create realistic resolutions with attainable mini-goals, what you're really doing is developing a plan to reach your final goal. Attainable mini-goals toward that bigger overall target are a way to ensure success, to focus on positive behavioral changes and to feel good about the successes you're achieving. This all adds up to positive reinforcement that will help keep you going and increase your chances for successfully fulfilling that resolution.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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