Newsletter

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Why New Year's resolutions fail

Dr. Elizabeth Lombardo
www.50plus.com
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From paying off debt to losing weight, each New Year, hundreds of millions of vows are pledged to make positive changes. Here are 5 top reasons we fail at keeping our resolutions.

Traditionally, the arrival of a new year has been a time to look back at the past, and more importantly, to the future. And every year on January 1st, hundreds of millions of vows are pledged to make positive changes such as:

• I will lose 50 pounds this year.
• I will no longer eat fast food.
• I will workout every day.
• I will stop smoking.
• I will stop stressing out so much.

While intentions may be good, research shows that within 6 months the majority of us will have returned back to our less-than-healthy habits.

So, "why bother?" you might ask. Well, over 60 per cent of us will die from illnesses caused or made worse by overeating, lack of exercise or smoking. And some doctors estimate that stress plays a significant role in 90 per cent of all illness. Not to mention how being unhealthy — psychologically and physically — can lead to issues outside of your body: increased risk for depression and anxiety, insomnia, marital strain, reduced productivity, job loss, accidents, financial strain... The list goes on and on.

The good news, though, is that you can make and maintain healthy changes in your life. If you choose to start in the New Year, that is great. Really, though, you can transform yourself anytime, any day, anywhere.

Top 5 pitfalls for change

So why do we have such problems making and sustaining positive changes in our lives? Here are the top 5 reasons we "fail" at New Year's Resolutions:

Your "BUT" is too big: By this, I mean your obstacles. Or, as some people call them your excuses. Examples include:

• "I want to lose weight BUT I hate to exercise."
• "I want to eat a healthier diet BUT I am too busy."
• "I want to quit smoking BUT I have tried before and failed."

We all have reasons in our mind as to why we "can't" or don't follow through with our goal. We convince ourselves that these obstacles are law: they are true, unchangeable and preventing us from

transforming our lives.

The thought "If only this were not the case, THEN I would be successful" takes over and often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Your "Why" is too small: Your reason TO change is not as strong as your "BUT I can't" justification. If your determination and passion to make the change outweighed the obstacles (no matter how high the obstacle), you could do anything.

Sure, you may want to lose weight so you are healthier. BUT your drive for "Ben & Jerry's therapy" is a lot stronger. It outweighs your desire to be healthy.

And I am not talking your rational mind, here. Most people can say, rationally, that losing weight when you are overweight is more important that using food as a coping mechanism. The problem is, we often do not think rationally. We think emotionally (e.g., "but it makes me *feel* better" even when you know that, in the long term, it could cause more problems).

All-or-nothing attitude: We tend to think in rather all-or-nothing patterns. For example:

• "I can't run with my bad knees so I can't exercise"
• "I already had one cookie so I might was well eat the entire plate."
• "I tried to quit smoking in the past but went back to it. I am a failure and just can't do it."

Any of these sound familiar? Over generalizing beliefs like these can prevent us from trying to make a change or re-trying if we revert back to out old ways.

Unrealistic goals: So often we set ourselves up for "failure" because of our unrealistic expectations. For example, I was working with a gentleman once who was struggling with substance abuse issues. One January he resolved to quit: smoking, drinking, drug use, all prescriptive medication, caffeine, sugar and fast food. He so wanted to change and was determined to complete transform his life in one step. Any slip up would be deemed "a failure."

How fair is this? Not very. Sure, we may not have that many significant changes we want to make. But we often set as a goal a lofty long-term desire and get frustrated or even dejected that we do not achieve it in the manner or timeframe that we want.

As we will see, establishing healthy long-term benchmarks is terrific. It is vital, though, that we also have more short-term goals where we can succeed and celebrate our achievements, too.

Not addressing the root of the problem: Often we try to make a behavioral change without addressing the real issue at hand. Many times the habit is the *symptom* of the problem, rather than the actual problem.

For example, I have had dozens of clients come to me saying they want to lose weight. They have tried every diet out there and, in the past, many have lost a fair amount of weight, but the pounds just came back. They feel helpless and hopeless. "I don't know what to do."

Rather than focus on the size of their waistline, however, we concentrate on improving their psychological well-being. Untreated depression, stress, anger, resentment, anxiety, low self-esteem, fear, unresolved trauma and many others can all lead to overeating. If we don't address the underlying issue once and for all, then the short-term changes in eating will not endure. And the pounds will return.