

Positive change needs simple steps, not New Year's resolutions

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FULL TEXT

We have reached the beginning of 2023. This means a busy holiday season with family and friends, enjoying plenty of food and festivities, will be drawing to a close. .

Many people see the new year as a launchpad for change using New Year's resolutions. People may resolve to exercise more, eat healthier, drink less alcohol or incorporate some other positive activity in their lives. Such New Year's resolutions may sound great at a New Year's Eve party, as you enjoy another glass of Champagne or down another helping of nachos. They are, however, notoriously unsuccessful in leading to lasting change.

Why is that the case?

New Year's resolutions are not commitments to change. They may be nothing more than public statements that generate chatter and attention. They are often more aspirational than true intentions.

If a person is committed to make positive and constructive changes, a specific date such as Jan. 1 is not necessary. Any day can do.

Change often requires a reprogramming of habits. Whether it is eating healthier, increasing how much we exercise or losing weight, starting something positive typically demands that something else be stopped. The challenge is that what we want to stop is often grounded in habits. And habits are hard to break. They are paths of least resistance that have been nurtured often for years.

So what are some low-risk approaches a person can take to increase the likelihood of positive changes in their lives?

Start small: If you want to exercise more, signing up to run a 10K race will not work. Focusing on small steps, such as a five-minute walk, to build confidence sets you on a path for success. This may mean as little as parking your car at the grocery store in a spot that is farther away from the entrance. Get into the habit of doing this, and as you cultivate new habits, they will set the stage for increased efforts in the future.

Avoid all-or-nothing thinking: It is easy to get discouraged when your best laid plans go awry. This should not be an excuse to give up. It should, instead, place the focus on improvement. And as long as improvements occur, then progress is being made.

Persistence pays off: Failures can be valuable teachers as building blocks for future success. I teach this to my students, that a poor grade on an assignment or exam can be a starting point for better performance in the future. Much like a call to arms, failure can grab our attention and push us forward when we would be most vulnerable to giving up.

Set priorities: Trying to make six changes all at once will be overwhelming. Prioritize your goals and begin working through them. One encouraging success is better than several discouraging failures.

Help others change: One way to make positive changes in your life is to help others make positive changes. Want to exercise more? Find someone who also wants to exercise more and help them do so. In the process, you will discover that you will also be exercising. There is power to be gained in helping others.

One definition of insanity is believing that doing the same things will produce different results. If you want positive change, you will have to do things differently. If you do the same things, nothing will change.

I teach my students these simple principles, and when applied, they lead to positive changes.

The new year is indeed a new beginning, at least on the calendar and for taxes. However, the best time to initiate positive changes is when there is a need, a desire and a motivation. These three factors can lay the groundwork for positive changes. If the new year happens to coincide with these three factors, all the better. Yet there are 364 other days that can work just as well.

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CAPTION: Photo: With New Year's Day, the holiday season comes to a close, and people are inclined to make resolutions for the new year. But positive change comes from taking simple, consistent steps. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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