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Making Your New Year's Resolution Stick

Lose weight? Check. Start exercising? Check. Stop smoking? Check.

It can be daunting when your list of New Year's Resolutions is as long as your holiday shopping list. In addition to the post-holiday slump, not being able to keep your resolutions by February, March or even late January may increase your anxiety. When your holiday decorations are packed up and stored away, the frustration of an unused gym membership or other reminders of failed resolutions can make the later winter months feel hopeless.

However, it is important to remember that the New Year isn't meant to serve as a catalyst for sweeping character changes. It is a time for people to reflect on their past year's behavior and promise to make positive lifestyle changes. "Setting small, attainable goals throughout the year, instead of a singular, overwhelming goal on January 1 can help you reach whatever it is you strive for," says psychologist Lynn Bufka, PhD. "Remember, it is not the extent of the change that matters, but rather the act of recognizing that lifestyle change is important and working toward it, one step at a time."

By making your resolutions realistic, there is a greater chance that you will keep them throughout the year, incorporating healthy behavior into your everyday life. APA offers these tips when thinking about a New Year's resolution:

Start small — Make resolutions that you think you can keep. If, for example, your aim is to exercise more frequently, schedule three or four days a week at the gym instead of seven. If you would like to eat healthier, try replacing dessert with something else you enjoy, like fruit or yogurt, instead of seeing your diet as a form of punishment.

Change one behavior at a time — Unhealthy behaviors develop over the course of time. Thus, replacing unhealthy behaviors with healthy ones requires time. Don't get overwhelmed and think that you have to reassess everything in your life. Instead, work toward changing one thing at a time.

Talk about it — Share your experiences with family and friends. Consider joining a support group to reach your goals, such as a workout class at your gym or a group of

coworkers quitting smoking. Having someone to share your struggles and successes with makes your journey to a healthier lifestyle that much easier and less intimidating.

Don't beat yourself up — Perfection is unattainable. Remember that minor missteps when reaching your goals are completely normal and OK. Don't give up completely because you ate a brownie and broke your diet, or skipped the gym for a week because you were busy. Everyone has ups and downs; resolve to recover from your mistakes and get back on track.

Ask for support — Accepting help from those who care about you and will listen strengthens your resilience and ability to manage stress caused by your resolution. If you feel overwhelmed or unable to meet your goals on your own, consider seeking professional help. Psychologists are uniquely trained to understand the connection between the mind and body. They can offer strategies as to how to adjust your goals so that they are attainable, as well as help you change unhealthy behaviors and address emotional issues.