

MAKING IT STICK: RESOLUTIONS THAT WORK

by Frank D. Young PhD., R. Psych.1 [1]

This time of year is often a good time to take stock of where we have been, what we have done, where we are going, and what we are doing to get there. Many people, disappointed with the false starts of previous years, say "The one thing I have resolved this year is not to make any New Year's resolutions!" That is, don't risk failure; suspend self-examination and goal setting; avoid the January burst of enthusiasm followed by the February collapse; just continue with life as it is. But wait a minute.

THIS YEAR CAN BE DIFFERENT!! HOW?? BY MAKING IT STICK!!

There are a number of practical ways to make it much more likely that your goals will be reached and surpassed.

1. Set your Mission.

Many self-reform goals fail because they are not genuinely congruent with that person's life mission or circumstances.

As Steven Covey says, begin with the end in mind (Covey, 1989). What this really means for our purposes is to really ask yourself: "Why am I here on this earth? What do I want to do while I'm here? What values do I want to live by?"

1 [1] Frank D. Young PhD., C. Psych. 935 Eastwicke Cres. Comox, BC V9M 1B2

This is a valuable time to take stock to create happiness, because only through living a life congruent with one's values can joy be sustained. I'm not kidding! Your life does not have to be fulfilled in terms of your needs in order to be meaningful, but your actions need to reflect your values as best you can. This is the path of integrity and ultimate satisfaction that will give you passion, purpose, and peace.

Consider the 10 values you consider to be most important in your life. For each value, write a brief sentence to describe your feeling about its importance or meaning. Examples might be:

3. Creativity. I enjoy imagining, creating, or designing new ideas, and bringing these into full use or production.

9. Health. I live a balanced life that includes good nutrition, rest, and exercise.

This list of value statements is the basis for your Mission Statement, or personal charter.

Put this description in a private place that you see everyday. Post it up somewhere so that you can see the words. This will activate your **left brain** to propel you towards your goals.

Use Imagery to Paint a Picture of Your Future. From this list you can begin to use imagery to focus your goals and objectives for the coming year. Then you can work backwards to the next half-year to image steps along the way to realizing these values in daily living.

Start by imagining your life a year from now. What will be happening? What will you be doing? With whom? How? As you imagine this, are you enjoying yourself? Are you developing as a person, heading in the direction you want to go? Good. Okay now, expand this image or vision to include a balance between family, friends, career, community, spirituality, love, and leisure, guiding this mix with a sense of purpose and meaning. You may need to do this guided imagery experience several times, or perhaps discuss it with a special friend, to adjust it and get it right so that it fits for you. You can use commercial CDs to help guide this process (Young,1995).

Make a Big Colored Chart to Track your Progress. Now that you have an idea of what your future would look like, sound like, and feel like, write down a brief description of this future. Be as specific and as you can. Wherever possible, describe realistic, positively stated, measurable goals, with reasonable deadlines for achieving them, including an extra 20% time margin for snags and brief setbacks for each project. Make a goal collage, with colorful charts, pictures, and whatever other bright colorful artwork that will catch your eye and move your imagination. Keep this artwork in a place where you will see it every day. Chart your progress on it every day by using a bright color graph. This will activate your **right brain** to propel you towards your goals.

Use Imagery Training Every Day. Daily mental imagery activates your positive habits and inspiration by keeping the goal state in mind. Make sure that you fantasize about the **enjoyment** you will experience when you have arrived at your goal and as you make progress towards it. Enjoyment is the key to emotion, and **emotion is the fuel** that will keep you on the path.

Enlist the group support of family and friends. Even the strongest individual needs regular social support to sustain positive change. It is especially helpful to include in your support group at least one **role model** of someone who has successfully made the personal change that you are now attempting. Even if it is your project, friends can keep you on track by giving you technical (how to do it) and emotional (cheering you on) support. Also, friends also serve as a public witness to your progress, making it more real and more integrated with your self-concept, your image of who you are. So celebrate goal attainment frequently and publicly with them.

Have a steady set of rewards to keep you on track in the first 5 months and the 8-11th month of your plan. You might expect that when you begin your new behavior that it will be instantly rewarding or self-sustaining. This is rarely the case. After the initial glow of novelty has worn off, the new habit is often weak and the ultimate rewards have not yet arrived. Take quitting smoking, for example. It is often several months before you genuinely appreciate the important health and fitness benefits that come from sustained non-smoking. In the short run you will probably need to set aside some rewards, such as a massage, a new article of clothing, a CD, or more equipment for a hobby or activity you like.

Remember that emotion is the fuel of personal change; positive feelings will keep the momentum going, and help get you through the difficult times when you are discouraged or plagued with doubt.

Have a recovery plan to cope with setbacks or plateaus. There are likely to be some lags or difficult times in your program of personal habit change. These are times of strain, self-sabotage, or external stress that tax your personal resources to stay on your personal change program. At those times you will need a way to regroup and return to your program with renewed commitment. The time to plan for this is now, before you begin the journey. A contingency plan might include the answers to these questions:

1. How is a setback most likely to occur, and how can you prevent it?
2. Who are you going to call? What are you going to do? What money or time will you need to set aside to refresh yourself? (Example: a quick getaway evening or weekend at a hotel or resort away from phones and commitments, with babysitters on standby).
3. How can you relate the break to a renewal of commitment to your program? There may need to be contact with your positive role model.

Integrate your change with the concept of who you are. Your objective is to make your personal change a permanent part of your weekly life during and after this year without external support. The most effective way to accomplish this is to publicly and privately make new attributions or descriptions of yourself that include the positive changes. For example: "I'm glad I'm a non-smoker. My health and fitness are much better now. I feel free of a habit that used to hold me back." We certainly know that we tend to act in conformance to the **attributions** we make about ourselves. We also tend to believe in those descriptions the more often we say them, especially if we repeat them in deeply relaxed or even drowsy (theta) states of consciousness. Continue to repeat these descriptions several times a day for the first year of your change, and several times a week for the next year or two.

After seeing all that is involved with personal change and following through with commitments to self-development, you might at times be overwhelmed with the size of the task, especially in the planning phases. However, remember, each one of the steps is do-able. Planning and support need to be in place so that you can follow through with confidence. Every realistic dream is achievable, if you first plan the work, then work the plan. Good luck, and get started now!

References:

Covey, S. (1989) The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. New York: Fireside Publishers.

Young, F. (1995) Building self-esteem: The mirror of your mind. Mind State Management Audiotape Series. Calgary: Boxer Production Studios. Available at selected bookstores in Alberta, B.C. and Ontario. (403) 220-9436.
