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MIND BREW

Office of Student Success

It's the New Year! Time for newer and better habits.

THE LEARNING SPECIALIST TEAM

Every year millions of Americans set New Years resolutions to form better habits or to ditch unhealthy behaviors. It is a clean slate to begin anew. US Polls estimate that 44% of Americans set a new goal for the upcoming year. We find it a common practice, yet most people who set goals are rarely able to sustain those behaviors for more than a month. So what goes into goal setting, sustaining behaviors, and creating better habits?

First, goal setting is highly related to timing. According to researchers, the temporal milestone of the New Year reflects the fresh start effect. People are more likely to set goals or change behavior at specific time milestones, such as the start of a new semester or new year (Oscarsson et al., 2020). Those that want to initiate behavioral changes at the start of a temporal milestone were more likely to sustain their behavioral changes and reach their goals than their counterparts that started in the middle of a milestone.

Now if goal achievement was as easy as just setting the goal at the right time, everyone would be able to sustain their behaviors. Goal achievement, like most psychological phenomena, is more complex. There are inherent personality dispositions and traits that increase the likelihood that someone will be able to change their behaviors and maintain that behavior. Higher self-efficacy and openness to change predicted positive outcomes for resolvers.

Having these personality traits makes it easier for some people to start and sustain their resolutions. However, people who identified lower in self-efficacy and openness are still able to maintain resolutions at a high rate. Meaning there are more pieces to the goal achievement and habit formation puzzle.

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" Successful people are simply those who have successful habits"

BRIAN TRACY



The type of goal you set can predict higher rates of success. Goal orientation contains two primary types of goals, approach- oriented goals versus avoidance- oriented goals. Approach- oriented goals involve reinforcing a behavior. Avoidance oriented goals involve extinguishing behaviors through avoidance. Researchers have found that those who set goals that are approach-oriented at the beginning of the year were significantly more likely to reach their goals (58%) than those with avoidance-oriented goals (47%).

Having the right orientation for your goal can help increase your chance of success. However, it isn't just the type of goal you set, but the challenge of the goal in and of itself. Challenge optimization states that people are more willing to commit to goals if they are of medium task difficulty. Too easy and the behaviors will most likely exterminate after a short amount of time. Too difficult, task-aversion is likely to set and people quit in the early stages of behavior formation. Researchers support the use of establishing SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Based) goals because it requires the person to assess the attainability of the goal. Furthermore, it sets specific criterion for implementing behaviors to achieve the goal.

While you can set the right goal setting conditions prior to, that doesn't guarantee you will commit to the behaviors needed to successfully complete your goal or resolution. Goal striving and commitment is the phase where most people fail in their resolutions. Even with meticulous planning, most people do not execute the necessary behaviors to approach their goal. This infers that tasks related to the goal may be too challenging and require more deliberate effort.

Building automaticity and reducing the amount of deliberate effort makes behavior easier to approach. Creating tiny habit that gradually builds in task difficulty makes it more likely that we will reach our goals. Successful completion of smaller habits make those behaviors more automatic and less likely to be disturbed by temptations.

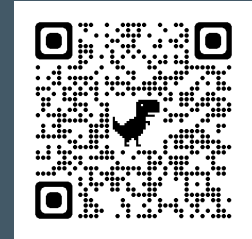
In building tiny habits and progressing towards long-term behavior change, there are three necessary components: prompts, task-matching, and reward. Stanford psychologist BJ Fogg and other researchers highlight having the right contextual cues or environmental prompts makes it more likely that you will initiate the habit (Mann et al. 2013). Then having matching motivation and ability (behavior and goal optimization) ensures that you have the necessary internal conditions to commit to the task. Lastly, you want to ensure that you reinforce the behavior to ensure that you keep executing until it becomes a habit. Tell yourself "good job" or share your successes with friends and family. Remember that with proper preparation, right conditions, and habits, we have the capability to achieve whatever goals we set forth for ourselves.

For more strategies and tips, please email your assigned learning specialist.

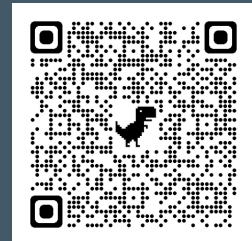
References
Mann, T., De Ridder, D., & Fujita, K. (2013). Self-regulation of health behavior: social psychological approaches to goal setting and goal striving. *Health Psychology, 32*(5), 487.
Oscarsson, M., Carlbring, P., Andersson, G., & Rozental, A. (2020). A large-scale experiment on New Year's resolutions: Approach-oriented goals are more successful than avoidance-oriented goals. *PLoS One, 15*(12), e0234097.

Cognitive Science in Media

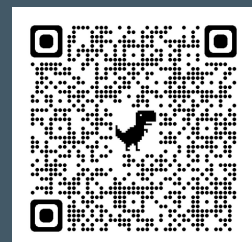
Science of Habits (APA's Speaking of Psychology)



A Behavioral Scientist's Guide to Change (NPR's Life Kit)



Tiny Habits and Behavioral Change (NPR's Life Kit)



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