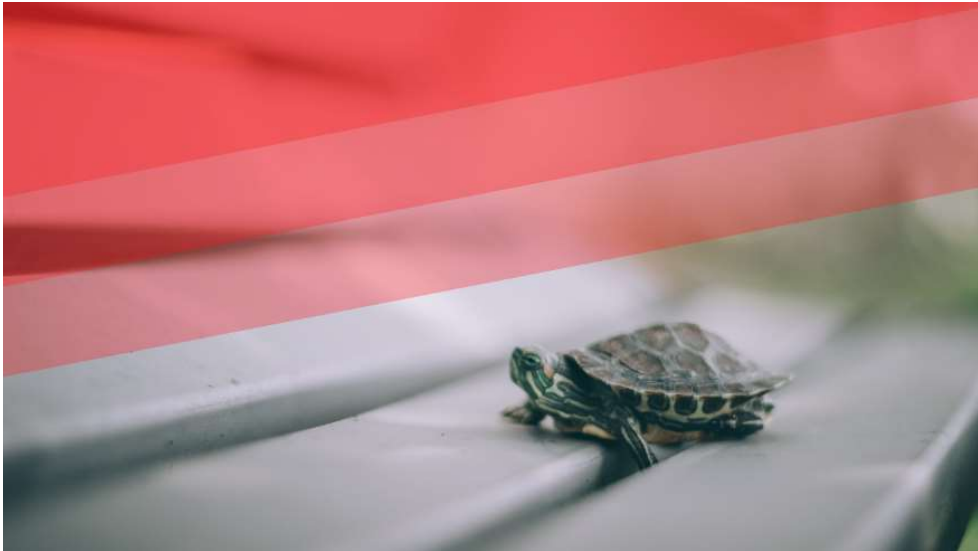


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So You Messed Up Your New Year' s Resolution

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Three Big Questions To Get Back On Track



Credit: Arun Thomas

You are likely familiar with the fable of the tortoise and the hare. Although much faster than the tortoise, the hare loses the race, because — overly confident — it decided to nap, while the tortoise crawled persistently — inch by inch — all the way to the finish line. The lesson is clear: success is earned through slow and steady perseverance. When it comes to our own goals, however, we all too often act like the hare: we make big leaps, aiming for quick initial progress, but slack off halfway through before we can see any real results.

New Year' s Eve is particularly likely to inspire our inner hare. We see the whole year in front of us like a blank canvas on which we project our hopes and dreams for the future. And we think about everything we want to change, all the goals we want to achieve, and all the old habits we want to leave behind. This year is going to be it. New year, new me. And so we take swift actions. We sign up for that gym around the corner. We buy those dieting books. We throw out our remaining cigarettes, and even tell a few people about our intentions.

But then comes the moment where you are really challenged. You actually have to exercise. You actually have to deal with the urge to eat that brownie, or to light up that

cigarette. You may even succeed at first, but slips happen, and before you know it, you are back to your old patterns. Moments like these can be frustrating, because despite your best efforts, you weren't able to make a lasting difference. You may even begin to wonder whether true change is actually possible, or if it's just a lie to make you buy more gym equipment.

The truth is, real change is possible. But it rarely happens through big one-off efforts. It happens through small continuous steps, and, when there are small missteps, through routine readjustments. Not hare, but tortoise.

People often envision change as a dramatic, effortful ordeal. Something like a Rocky Balboa training montage. In real life, however, commitments become evident only cumulatively. The grit and grain of change is small. Routine. Unimportant. Boring. Almost insignificant. Only when we haven't seen Uncle Stanley for half a year can we see what skipping out on that morning glazed-chocolate donut can do to a person's belly.

And even more, change is marked by setbacks and failures. Usually they too are small — though ironically they instantly loom large in our judgmental minds. I had a cigarette. No, not a pack a day for a week — that larger form of a "slip" has not yet happened yet. I had a cigarette. "What's the use?!" your mind says. "You went through three tough days but now you've lost it all!" Bulls**t. That wheel is still in spin. One pack a day for a week is 140 cigarettes. You are only 7/10ths of one percent down *that* road.

If you feel like you have messed up your resolution, you don't need to abandon your goal. Instead, reconsider your approach. The following three questions can give you some guidance about what you can do to get back on track. Now, I don't want you to just read the questions, or they won't help you at all. Instead, take a pen and paper, and set a timer for each question for one minute to think about them, and find your own answers. Here is the first one.

Question #1 What Small Thing Can You Do To Show Yourself Kindness?

All too often, we attempt to make changes in order to "fix" ourselves. There is part of us that we have come to actively dislike, and our attempt at change is an attempt to make that part — and thus ourselves — acceptable (i.e., "lovable") again. Even worse, our strategy might be to bully ourselves into action, using insults that fuel feelings of shame (e.g. "get off your butt, you lazy pig"). This is not only less fun, it's also often less productive. After all, a lot of bad habits are just coping methods to deal with uncomfortable feelings. By trying to use shame as a motivator, we fuel the very fires we actually want to extinguish. A much better way is to extend ourselves kindness. Take a minute to answer the question above. What small thing can you do to show yourself kindness? It can be a walk through the park, or it can be just giving yourself a self-hug. It

may sound silly, but these acts of self-kindness make a difference. Just make sure it's something that is genuinely good for your well-being.

Question #2 What Small Thing Can You Do Different Next Time?

There is a lesson inside every failure at making a change. Oftentimes, one thing leads to another, and before we know it, we are back from where we started. This may be frustrating, but it's no reason to quit just yet. Instead, put on your detective hat and retrace your last steps. What actually happened? What was that "one thing" that led to another? You may find that keeping your diet is not just about picking the right items in the supermarket. Instead, it may be about keeping a full 8 hours of sleep, or about solving the conflict with your spouse, or about not watching TV until 2 AM. Your context matters, because it influences you without pause. And when you slip up, try something different the next time. Again, it doesn't have to be big, but it can be small. Take a minute to answer the question above. If you need some inspiration about what you can do, you may find [this list of ideas](#) very helpful.

Question #3 What Small Thing Can You Do Right Now?

Change doesn't start by thinking and feeling different. Instead, it starts with your actions. Depending on the change you aim for, these new actions may feel utterly alien. However, the more you act a certain way, the more your thoughts and feelings will follow. For instance, if you are starting up an exercise program, it may feel hard and uncomfortable. In the past you may have noticed that in times when you did exercise regularly you began to miss if you didn't get your work out in. Actions come first, and your body will follow. So take another minute to answer the question above: what small thing can you do right now? It doesn't have to be big. What matters, is that you get into the habit of taking action — one small step after the other. Again, if you need some ideas, you may find [this list of action items](#) helpful.

Change will challenge you time and time again. Whenever you find yourself slipping and reverting to your old ways, take a moment to reflect on these three questions.

Superficially, keeping a commitment means not slipping up and yes, you should intend that. But that intention is only safe to you as a behavior guide if you *also* are committed to getting back up, trying again, and persisting in your efforts. A tortoise slowly climbing a hill is trying not to lose traction, but if its foot slips, it tries again. The hare facing the same situation takes a nap. Tortoise, not hare.

Here is to a great new year.