**Fresh Starts**

The summer vacation had started. My son, Sid, who is 6 years old, had joined a summer camp which ran for 2 hours in the morning. One Saturday I collected him from the camp and we decided to go for a movie. He loves the whole experience associated with going for a movie, the 3d glasses, the popcorn and the coke. We had a great time at the movies and we were well into his lunch time by the time we reached home. On reaching home my wife wanted to quickly give him a shower and give him his lunch, considering he had been out since morning. Sid however had different plans. He wanted to go out to play with his friends whom he could hear outside the house. He threw a tantrum and refused to either have a bath or have lunch or do anything we told him to unless we allowed him to go out and play more. We tried reasoning with him, negotiating with him and tried threatening him. He was told that if he continued this behaviour then we will take back his tv time, and there will be no more movies for him for the rest of his vacation. Nothing worked and we literally had to force him to have the bath and the lunch. We followed up by keeping our part of the bargain and he was not allowed TV time. Next morning was Sunday and I was having coffee and watching the news on TV. Sid came over and said lets watch the Sunday cartoons. I reminded him of his behaviour on Saturday and how he was not going to have any more TV time considering his behaviour. At this Sid said - Acha, but that was yesterday, today is a new day. Let’s make a fresh start.

I was tongue tied on hearing this, but recovered somehow to compliment him on his optimistic attitude, followed up by explaining what an optimist and a pessimist is and let him watch his cartoons.

**New beginnings, Clean starts or Fresh starts as they are referred to by Behavioral Economists plays an important part in how long people stick to their resolutions.**

When the psychologist John Norcross researched New Year’s resolutions, in the late nineteen-eighties, he [found](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/2728957) that more than 50% of Americans made some sort of resolution. After 6 months, only 19 per cent had stuck with it. Even among the successes, more than half had experienced lapses. Still, we keep telling ourselves that we can lose weight, save money, and go to the gym.

**It turns out that timing is important in determining whether or not we succeed in following thru with our resolutions.** In May, 2012, Katherine Milkman, a behavioral economist at the University of Pennsylvania, found herself in a discussion about **“nudges”—small environmental interventions that could shift people’s behavior. “** In the course of the conversation, someone posed a question, “When would nudges be the most effective?” Milkman’s research hadn’t focussed on that particular aspect of nudges, but, she said, “I had a strong instinct that they’d be more effective at **turning points—moments that feel like a new beginning**.”

To see if the idea of temporal turning points held any merit Milkman and her team conducted a [series of studies](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2204126). **They found that fresh starts do push us to change our behavior. The beginning of a week, a month, or a year forms what the psychologist call a “notational boundary.”** With that, researchers suspect, comes **a sense of optimism, the promise of “a new me,**” as Milkman put it.

To test that theory, her team looked at daily Google searches for the term “diet” over a period of 9 years. They found that searches followed a predictable cycle: they peaked at the start of any given week, month, or year, then gradually tapered off. The largest increase—82% cent above the baseline—occurred immediately after New Year’s.

Milkman and her colleagues then looked at behaviour by tracking the gym attendance of nearly 12K undergraduates over a year and a half by measuring the participants’ average number of visits. Gym attendance peaked in January, they found, and decreased in the following months. Smaller spikes occurred at the beginning of each week, each month, and each term.

Finally, the researchers looked at commitments on a Web site called stickK, which allows you to set a goal and contractually determine the consequences for failing to attain it, ranging from community sanctions to monetary payments. (If you don’t lose those 5 kilos, you’ve agreed to donate $50 to a political party that you loathe.) After tracking 43k people over 2.5, the team found that the greatest number of contracts—a 145% above the average rate—were signed at the start of the new year. Throughout the year, each week and each month had a mini-cycle of its own, with the beginning of the week corresponding to a 63% increase. **“Every week brings a new opportunity and people take advantage of that, whether or not they know it.”**

This sensibility even influences the stock market. In a phenomenon known as the **January Effect**, the market always performs better than average at this time of year. [Recent evidence](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15427560.2011.602197) suggests part of the explanation lies in simple optimism: in January, we take a rosier view of the future, and tend to bid up uncertain stocks. (They subsequently fall back to their real value.)

**Reflecting on the premise of fresh starts if people realize how many opportunities there are for them put their imperfections behind them and that they do not need to wait for a New Year to revisit their resolutions, then there is a greater probability of them achieving their goals. Maybe we all can’t take the extreme attitude of Sid where he sees each day as a new start, but it’s certainly worth looking at each week as a new beginning.**