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Why Your New Year's Resolutions Fail and What Science Says You Should Do Differently

The Resolution Paradox

Every January, millions of people set ambitious goals for the year ahead. They resolve to exercise more, eat healthier, save money, or advance their careers. These resolutions reflect genuine desires for self-improvement, supported by compelling reasons: improved health, financial security, and professional success. Yet by mid-February, most have abandoned these well-intentioned plans.

A new study published in *Psychological Science* offers a surprising explanation for this widespread failure. The research, led by Kaitlin Woolley of Cornell University along with colleagues Laura Giurge of the London School of Economics and Ayelet Fishbach of the University of Chicago, followed people pursuing New Year's resolutions for an entire year. Their findings challenge conventional wisdom about what sustains people's commitment to their goals.

The Motivation That Matters

The researchers drew a critical distinction between two types of motivation. Extrinsic motivation refers to pursuing a goal for the outcomes it will produce, such as exercising to improve health or saving money to provide financial security. Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, refers to finding the pursuit itself rewarding, such as exercising because you genuinely enjoy the activity or saving because you see the process satisfying.

The study's central finding was striking: although people overwhelmingly set goals for extrinsic

reasons, their success in maintaining those goals was predicted by intrinsic motivation, not extrinsic motivation. In other words, believing that a goal is essential, helpful, or life-changing did not help people follow through. What mattered was whether they found the pursuit enjoyable, engaging, and personally rewarding in the moment.

A Year of Following Resolutions

In the primary study, researchers recruited 2,000 American adults who had set New Year's resolutions. The most common goals involved physical health (nearly 40%), followed by financial goals, healthier consumption habits, professional development, personal growth, and relationship improvements.

At the start of the year, participants rated both their intrinsic motivation (how enjoyable, engaging, and positive the pursuit felt) and their extrinsic motivation (how useful, necessary, and life-changing they believed it to be). The researchers then followed up at four-month intervals throughout the year to assess whether participants were still pursuing their resolutions and how successful they felt.

The results were consistent across all time points. Intrinsic motivation at each measurement predicted success at the subsequent measurement, whereas extrinsic motivation was not significantly associated with adherence. This pattern held whether participants were measured in April, August, or November. Among those who completed all four surveys, 16% had achieved their resolution by year's end, and higher intrinsic motivation at the outset significantly predicted membership in that group.

The Finding Holds Across Cultures

To test whether these results were specific to American culture, the researchers conducted a parallel study in China during the Chinese New Year. They recruited 500 participants and followed up one month later. The distribution of goals differed notably from that in the American sample: 45% of Chinese participants set professional, career, or learning objectives, whereas 13% of American participants did.

Despite these differences in goal types and cultural context, the pattern replicated. Chinese participants who found their resolutions more enjoyable and engaging were more likely to adhere to them. In contrast, those who rated their goals as more important or valuable showed no greater adherence. This suggests the power of intrinsic motivation extends beyond Western, individualistic cultures.

Objective Evidence From Step Counts

The researchers recognized a potential limitation in their approach: asking people to rate their own success could introduce bias. To address this, they conducted a third study using objective behavioral data.

They recruited 439 participants who aimed to increase their walking and used step-counting apps on their phones. Participants reported their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for walking, and their actual daily step counts over two weeks.

The results were consistent with previous studies. Participants with higher intrinsic motivation walked significantly more steps on average. Those who were one standard deviation above the mean in intrinsic motivation walked approximately 1,250 more steps per day than those at the mean. Meanwhile, extrinsic motivation was not significantly associated with actual walking behavior.

Proving Causation Through Experiment

Correlation does not prove causation. Perhaps people who naturally enjoy activities simply report higher intrinsic motivation, while those who struggle rely on extrinsic justifications. To establish that inherent motivation actually drives behavior, the researchers designed an experiment.

They recruited over 700 participants and had them download Yuka, a health app that allows users to scan product barcodes to learn about their health impact. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of two descriptions of the app. Half were told it was “a fun new game with surprising product discoveries” that would let them “unravel the mystery” behind their products. The other half were told it would provide “useful and important product information” based on “research-backed” analysis.

Twenty-four hours later, participants reported the number of products they had scanned, as verified by screenshots from the app. Those who had been primed to think of the app as fun scanned 26% more products than those who had been told it was useful and important. This demonstrated that framing an activity in intrinsically motivating terms increases engagement, not merely that intrinsically motivated people engage more.

Why We Get It Wrong

If intrinsic motivation is so important, why do people set goals based on extrinsic factors? The researchers explored this question in follow-up studies. They found that 90% of participants reported setting a resolution because it was important for their long-term welfare, rather than because it was enjoyable in the moment.

They also tested whether people understand the factors that motivate goal adherence. Participants were asked to predict whether someone pursuing a healthy-eating goal would be more likely to maintain it if it were important rather than enjoyable, useful rather than providing a positive experience, or life-changing rather than engaging. On average, participants favored the extrinsic options, believing that importance, usefulness, and potential for life change would better predict success.

Interestingly, participants showed slightly greater insight when predicting what would motivate others than when predicting what would motivate themselves. This suggests that people may be particularly prone to underestimating the role of immediate experience in their own motivation.

The Practical Implications

These findings have significant implications for anyone trying to change their behavior or help others do so. The traditional approach to goal-setting emphasizes the “why”: articulating compelling reasons for pursuing a goal and keeping those reasons salient. This research suggests that the approach may be incomplete or even counterproductive.

Instead, people may benefit from choosing goals they find inherently enjoyable or finding ways to make necessary goals more intrinsically rewarding. Prior research supports this idea. Studies have shown that cafeteria diners eat more vegetables when signs emphasize their delicious taste rather than their health benefits. Gym-goers return more frequently when they can listen to engaging audiobooks only while exercising. These interventions work by adding intrinsic rewards to extrinsically motivated pursuits.

The researchers theorize that intrinsic motivation matters because it captures immediate benefits, while extrinsic motivation captures delayed benefits. Given that humans tend to discount future rewards relative to present ones, the immediate pleasure or engagement of an activity may simply

carry more psychological weight than abstract future outcomes.

Rethinking Resolution Season

As another New Year approaches, the findings from this research offer a different way to think about goal-setting. Rather than choosing resolutions based solely on their importance or potential impact, people might consider which goals they would genuinely enjoy pursuing. For goals that seem necessary but are not particularly enjoyable, the path to success may lie in making the pursuit itself more rewarding.

This does not mean abandoning ambitious or challenging goals. Even within the study, resolutions that were rated as more difficult were not inherently less likely to succeed. What mattered was whether people found meaning and enjoyment in the day-to-day work of pursuing them.

The research also suggests that policymakers, employers, and health professionals designing interventions to change behavior might achieve better results by focusing on immediate experience rather than long-term outcomes. Telling people that exercise will extend their lifespan may be less effective than helping them find forms of movement they genuinely enjoy.

The Bottom Line

People set goals because they care about their future. They want to be healthier, wealthier, more successful, and more fulfilled. But caring about outcomes is not enough to sustain the effort required to achieve them. What carries people through the daily grind of behavior change is finding something rewarding in the process itself.

The implications extend beyond New Year's resolutions. Whether someone is trying to learn a new skill, build a habit, or make a significant life change, the question worth asking may not be "why is this important?" but rather "how can I make this enjoyable?" The answer to that question may determine whether good intentions translate into lasting change.



Reference: [Woolley K, Giurge LM, Fishbach A. Adherence to Personal Resolutions Across Time, Culture, and Goal Domains. Psychol Sci. 2025;36\(8\):607-621.](#)

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Dr. Thomas is a highly sought-after physician whose medical expertise has been forged through extensive education and refined over nearly 40 years of clinical practice. He has helped people worldwide by providing innovative solutions that not only address their immediate health concerns, but also lay lasting foundations for optimal wellness. His strength lies in his scientific curiosity, creative and analytical thinking, and practical application of cutting-edge research. Despite the demands of a busy medical practice, to stay at the forefront and continuously improve the care of his patients, Dr. Thomas devotes 20-30 hours a week to reviewing the latest scientific literature and consulting with leading scientists to identify potentially promising treatments. He shares his evidence-based insights at ThomasHealthBlog.com, where complex medical science becomes actionable health information.

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