



Small steps lead to big change, experts say

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The promise of a fresh start each new year inspires millions of people to resolve to make sweeping changes. But most of those resolutions — to lose weight, to get physically or financially fit — won't survive the week, much less the year, if they're too overwhelming or unrealistic, experts said.

The secret to actually sticking to resolutions? Take small, manageable steps, experts said.

“As the proverb goes: The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step,” said Dr. Timothy Wolff, a psychiatrist at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. “So, make sure the first step is doable.”

Don't Aim Too High

People often aren't successful at sticking to New Year's resolutions because they set their goals too high or because they subconsciously can't accept change, Wolff said.

To help resolutions become habits, Wolff suggests setting small goals, finding activities you enjoy that can help in attaining the goals and communicating your objectives to others, so as to be more accountable.

Often, people get frustrated and give up when they don't immediately see results. But succeeding with small goals helps to sustain enthusiasm, experts say.

Small But Achievable

“No matter what the desired change may be, it's very common to undertake a very ambitious goal only to find yourself getting very discouraged when you don't see the progress you had hoped for right away,” said Joel J. Ohman, a Tampa, Fla.-based certified financial planner and founder of website CarInsuranceComparison.com.

“If you want to save \$10,000, then don't get discouraged by thinking about the total, but rather set up a weekly savings goal and concentrate on hitting that small but achievable goal each and every week.”

All goals, no matter how lofty, can be achieved by breaking them down into smaller

tasks, said Thom Singer, an Austin-based business development consultant and author of the “The ABC’s of Networking.”

Singer has written nine books. To some, the idea of writing one book is daunting, he said.

How Do You Eat An Elephant?

But no one sits down and writes an entire book, Singer said.

Instead, they make outlines, break it down into chapters, then write a few pages each day, he said.

“You take a goal, break it down in to bite-size chunks. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”

Know your goals, commit to them and understand the path to achieving them, Singer said.

For example, the small step of skipping a doughnut is easier than losing 10 pounds, Singer said.

Once Around The Block

“But it is a step,” Singer said. “Asking yourself: ‘Is the doughnut bringing me closer to my goal?’ makes the doughnut less appealing,” he said.

If you’ve been a couch potato for years, resolving to run a marathon right away could lead to frustration, said Dr. Gabriela Cora, a Miami-based wellness coach, medical doctor and psychiatrist with an MBA.

“For example, if you have not exercised for years, how about starting off walking once around the block? How about increasing that to three times around the block after three days? How about then walking around five blocks within a week?”

Cora also is the author of “Leading Under Pressure: Strategies to Avoid Burnout, Increase Energy and Improve Your Well-Being.”

Emotion Of Cash

If your resolution is to save money this year, then take the first step by using cash instead of credit or debit cards when possible, said Sam Collins III, an associate minister at Greater St. Matthews Baptist Church in Hitchcock, where he oversees a financial ministry.

Using cash is a small step, but a powerful one, he said.

“The emotion of letting go of the cash helps you to spend less,” Collins said. “When you use plastic, it doesn’t feel like money, even when you’re using a debit card. But when

you actually have to lay out \$672 in cash, it makes you think: ‘Do I really need to spend this money?’”

Personal trainer Miguel Frank, owner of Friendswood-based Pressnflex Fitness, tries to instill in his clients that exercise alone isn’t enough for a buff physique. Nutrition plays the bigger part in how we look and feel, Frank said.

Around the new year, some of his clients start out strong with an exercise program but get frustrated when they don’t immediately drop the weight, he said.

“They think: ‘If only I started an exercise program I will look better and feel better because that’s what’s been missing in my life,” Frank said. “But that’s only part of the answer. Seventy-five percent of aesthetic as well as internal changes is through nutrition.”

Frank is a proponent of eating small, healthy meals throughout the day with the right mix of protein and carbohydrates.

But for those who start the day with a cigarette and coffee, or find a diet overhaul too daunting, then a small, first step would be to eating a healthy breakfast, Frank said.

Skipping breakfast raises levels of cortisol, known as a “stress hormone” and encourages storage of dangerous belly fat, Frank said. While it seems counterintuitive, eating breakfast helps to burn more calories during the day, experts say.

“If you do not feed yourself first thing, your body is flooded with cortisol,” he said.

Whatever you do, write down your resolutions and goals and keep them visible, Singer said.

“If you don’t write them down, then they’re just wishes,” Singer said.

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