- New Year's Resolution

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REVIEW

Why do so many New Year's resolutions fail?

Establishing positive new habits is hard at any time of year. But there are ways to stop your attempts ending in failure

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Every year millions of us dream up New Year's resolutions in the hope of making permanent, positive changes to our lives. But a few weeks later, most of them are little more than vague memories. More often than not, we're back to our old routines by the end of January – projects have been abandoned, promises have been broken and the resolutions we vowed we would stick to this time have been tossed on the scrapheap.

But what is it about New Year's resolutions that makes keeping them so difficult? And what can we do to make it easier?

Well, the good news is a New Year's resolution is just a good habit dressed up in seasonal clothing. And with a little understanding of the psychology of how habitual behaviours are formed, you can start (or restart after an earlier failed attempt) a new habit anytime, at any point in the calendar. So here are seven tips to overcome the obstacles that make establishing a new good habit so hard, whether you're trying to do it in January, June or December…

1. BE AN EARLY BIRD

When you start something new, like a new hobby, do it as soon as possible in the day. Even if you're not a morning person or need to take your kids to school, applying this rule is a cornerstone of lasting change for several reasons.

Navigating the trials and tribulations of daily life means that your willingness to use motivational resources, such as willpower, will typically decline as the day goes on, while factors like tiredness and fatigue will increase. The further in the future your plans are, the less likely it is that you can predict how you're going to feel.

You may wake up and feel confident that you'll exercise after work, but fail to consider how tired, stressed and hungry you'll be by then. And, the longer you leave it to exercise, the more likely it is that unexpected obstacles will arise. Get your new hobby done before your washing machine floods your kitchen. Only when your new habit is well-established can you relax this rule.

"This principle doesn't just apply to exercise and dieting"

2. DON'T WAIT FOR THE REWARD

There's nearly always an underlying reason for making a New Year's resolution or starting a new activity. Many people start exercising because they want to lose weight, for example. But the distinction between the activity and the desired outcome is important because it's the latter that's motivating, not the former.

Nobody likes having to resist cake for months, but everybody likes fitting into their jeans. When there's a significant delay between the activity and the desired outcome, it prevents us from associating the motivational power of the outcome with the activity.

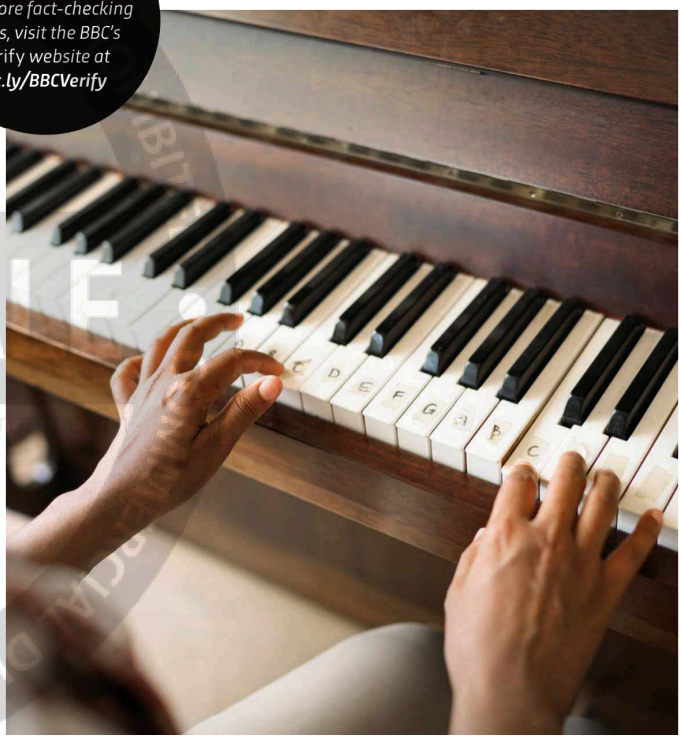
In contrast, an immediate outcome better transfers its motivational power to the activity. Sticking to a diet is difficult if weight loss is the goal because a day or two of calorie-controlled eating is unlikely to lead to any noticeable changes in weight or body shape. On the flip side, focusing on the immediate mental health-boosting properties of exercise is much more effective than waiting for the physical health benefits that come later.

This principle doesn't just apply to exercise and dieting. Any new activity with an immediate benefit increases the likelihood you'll stick to it long-term.

3. START SMALLER THAN YOU THINK

To paraphrase former-US president, Theodore Roosevelt, any worthy goal requires effort. Oddly, however, the thought of starting an activity seems to require more effort than continuing it. This quirk implies that we should break our larger ambitions down into smaller initial goals that require minimal effort, in order to get the ball rolling.

Many people are familiar with the Chinese proverb "A journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step." But few people recognise the contrast between the larger goal (1,000 miles) and how small the first sub-goal (a single step) should be. If your dream is to write a book, the first goal shouldn't be to write a page, but simply to open your notebook or laptop. →



ABOVE If you're learning a new instrument, focus on the process of improving, rather than how little your early efforts sound like the songs you want to play

LEFT Start small – just writing something to get going, is easier than jumping straight into chapter one of the novel you've been wanting to write

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"This mental shortcut – the 'affect heuristic' – prevents the need to consciously weigh up the pros and cons of every decision"

→ 4. CONSISTENCY IS KEY

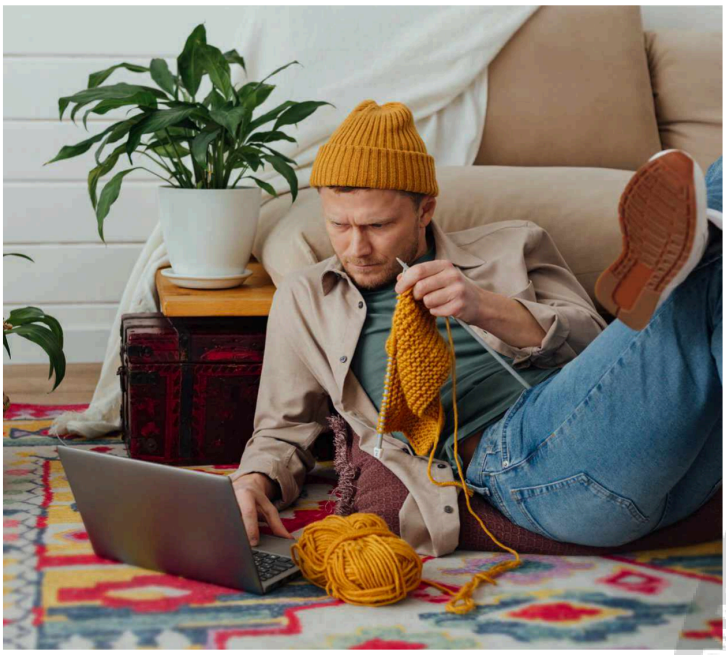
Small goals make it easier to make consistent progress, and consistency increases the chances of your new activity becoming a habit. What's more, repeating that activity in the same environment will eventually lead to you automatically linking that environment to the activity you want to become a habit.

For example, you could try opening your language app while you wait for the kettle to boil at breakfast. Do this often enough and it'll become part of your morning routine. You then won't have to make so much of a conscious effort to motivate yourself to do your daily language learning, because boiling the kettle for your morning coffee will automatically trigger thoughts about it.

5. LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Competition can be a problematic motivator because the outcome is out of your control. Rather than defining success by whether or not you're performing better than others (a normative-referenced approach), define it by comparing your current ability to your previous ability (a self-referenced approach).

BELOW Repeating the activity you wish to pursue in the same spot will help you associate that spot with performing the activity



by **DR IAN TAYLOR**
Ian is a motivational psychologist and author, based at Loughborough University.

People who take a self-referenced approach tend to be more engaged with activities, work hard to improve, and don't let setbacks derail them. In contrast, people who follow a normatively referenced approach look for shortcuts and opportunities to cheat, and avoid challenging activities because they fear looking stupid.

This isn't to say that self-referenced people don't care about winning. But thanks to their focus on hard work and personal development, a pleasant side effect of not focusing on winning is winning more often.

6. THE FEEL-GOOD FACTOR

Ask people what motivates them and their answers will largely stem from the logical areas of their brains, such as the pre-frontal cortex. These responses ignore the more primitive parts of the brain that often control what really motivates people, however.

These powerful parts of the brain largely consider what 'feeling' an activity provokes. When people make a judgement about whether to do something or not, it's this feeling that's consulted to enable a quick and efficient decision. This mental shortcut – the 'affect heuristic' – prevents the need to consciously weigh up the pros and cons of every decision. It not only motivates us without our knowledge, but it also biases our conscious decision-making.

For example, a previously unpleasant experience of an activity may bias us to conclude that we don't have time to do it again. As a result, we need to do things that make us feel good in some way. It doesn't need to be fun or exhilarating, although these are good feelings to promote. The positive feeling can also be some satisfaction or value gained from the activity.

7. BE THE CHANGE YOU WISH TO SEE

To establish long-term change, we should ask ourselves who we want to be, rather than what we want to do or have. When your goal is to pursue an activity that allows you to express your true character, it becomes easier to do. In contrast, activities that are performed to obtain something material, like a new car or a better body, require much more mental effort to sustain.

The relative ease of 'be' goals makes progress and long-term maintenance much more likely. In other words, being someone who exercises is easier than doing exercise, just as being studious is easier than studying. Begin acting in a way that reflects the characteristic you desire and you can reap the rewards of long-lasting change.

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ANALYSIS

How much exercise do you really need to do?

Is it 10,000 steps a day or three 30-minute workouts a week? What's the least amount of sweat you need to work up to stay healthy?

Lycra-clad fitness fanatics like to dine out on their exercise exploits, whether it's racking up mileage on running tracks or pumping iron in the gym. But while the rest of us might prefer to chew our own arms off than spend half an hour on the treadmill (and those of us with kids or hectic jobs might struggle to find half an hour at all), new research suggests there's more value than you might think in smaller portions of activity spread throughout the day.

Studies now show that getting in just a few 'snack-size' quantities of activity each day can help you stay healthier and live longer. One recent paper found that meagre helpings totalling little over three minutes of vigorous activity could cut the risk of all major cardiac events, including heart attack and stroke, by around 45 per cent in UK women. The study focused on people who otherwise considered themselves non-exercisers.

These findings are only now emerging due to modern movement trackers, which allow scientists to monitor people's activity levels much more accurately than they could by asking them to recall the exercise they'd done.

"Wrist-worn trackers are good for capturing mostly 'ambulatory' movement-based activities, like walking, but they'll also capture vigorous gardening and quite a few other things," says author of the study, Prof Emmanuel Stamatakis from the University of Sydney. "One of the reasons we're able to see such large effects from such small amounts of physical activity is the accurate measurement."

Stamatakis studies what he calls 'vigorous intermittent lifestyle physical activity' (VILPA) – short, intense bouts of activity, such as running upstairs, that people do as part of their daily routines, rather than as 'exercise', which implies a level of planning.

An earlier study using tracker data showed that middle-aged and older inactive people who did three 1–2-minute VILPA bouts each day were around 40-per-cent less likely to die within seven years compared to those who did none. The concept of VILPA is similar to that of micro-exercises, or 'exercise snacks', which are also known to have health benefits.

PRECISION MATTERS

Before fitness trackers, scientists could only get rough estimates of people's activity from surveys.

"Typically, these ask for bouts of at least 10 minutes of walking, cycling or gardening, so you've already →

ABOVE Staying healthy needn't mean spending all your spare time working out, according to recent research

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→ cut off many of the [shorter] activities," says public health expert Prof Lennart Veerman from Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. "People can't really recall what they were doing and if you measure what they're doing imprecisely, then it's more difficult to establish a relationship with an outcome."

Veerman's recent work used data from trackers and looked at the link between activity levels and longevity in Americans aged 40 and over. The results show that when people are divided into four groups by activity level, every hour of walking done by people in the least active group could add an extra six hours to their lives – and if they increased their overall activity levels to those of the most active group, they could add 11 years.

While Veerman's study converts all activities into the equivalent of walking, it does take account of differences in intensity. The good news, he says, is that any activity counts. On the other hand, it doesn't rule out people doing more intense activity for half the time. The work on VILPA and exercise snacks, meanwhile, looks exclusively at shorter, high-intensity bouts of exercise that Stamatakis says help our hearts to make healthy adaptations.

SOMETHING IS BETTER THAN NOTHING

Currently, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity – or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity – per week. But recent research across 163 countries suggests that nearly a third of us aren't achieving this and that activity levels are trending lower. So, could people be more inspired by a less daunting, more flexible target incorporating shorter bursts of activity?

University of Edinburgh-based epidemiologist, Dr Tessa Strain, who led the research, agrees that the current target, which equates to 30 minutes of exercise five times a week "can seem onerous in a busy world", even though it's provided for a raft of reasons related to both physical and mental health.

It's easier to imagine absorbing wider benefits from going for a jog in the park – such as chatting with

ABOVE Smart watches have made it possible to track people's activity levels more accurately

RIGHT Even short bouts of exercise, such as running up a flight of stairs, could have benefits

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"The aim with both concepts is to make physical activity more palatable, particularly to the least active among us"

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running buddies or communing with nature – compared to blasting up three flights of stairs. But for those of us who don't have the time or inclination, Strain notes that the WHO is also promoting the message: "every move counts." And the small print in the official guidelines acknowledges that "doing some physical activity is better than none."

Both VILPA and exercise snacks are potential antidotes to inactivity, the idea being that they can be sprinkled into your daily routine (to get the best results, however, it needs to be done liberally). VILPA can include any activity you do as part of your day, whereas exercise snacks tend to be more intentional bursts of activity, according to Prof Jonathan Little of the University of British Columbia, one of the originators of the concept. "With exercise snacks, we've prescribed or instructed people what to do throughout the day." An example might be marching on the spot next to your desk or doing jumping jacks before you brush your teeth.

The aim with both concepts is to make physical activity more palatable, particularly for the least active among us. One way to imagine them is like high-intensity interval training (HIIT) workouts, but with much longer recoveries. HIIT crams big fitness boosts into short exercise sessions and Little's work suggests that exercise snacks could have similar effects.

According to Little, VILPA and exercise snacks are complementary and could help "move the needle" for those who are discouraged by hefty exercise regimes. Stamatakis, meanwhile, is planning future research that combines the two.

One possible issue with VILPA, however, is that it can't be scheduled. In Stamatakis's studies, activity is classified in 10-second windows by AI algorithms that learn to identify movements based on tracker data from people doing known movements.

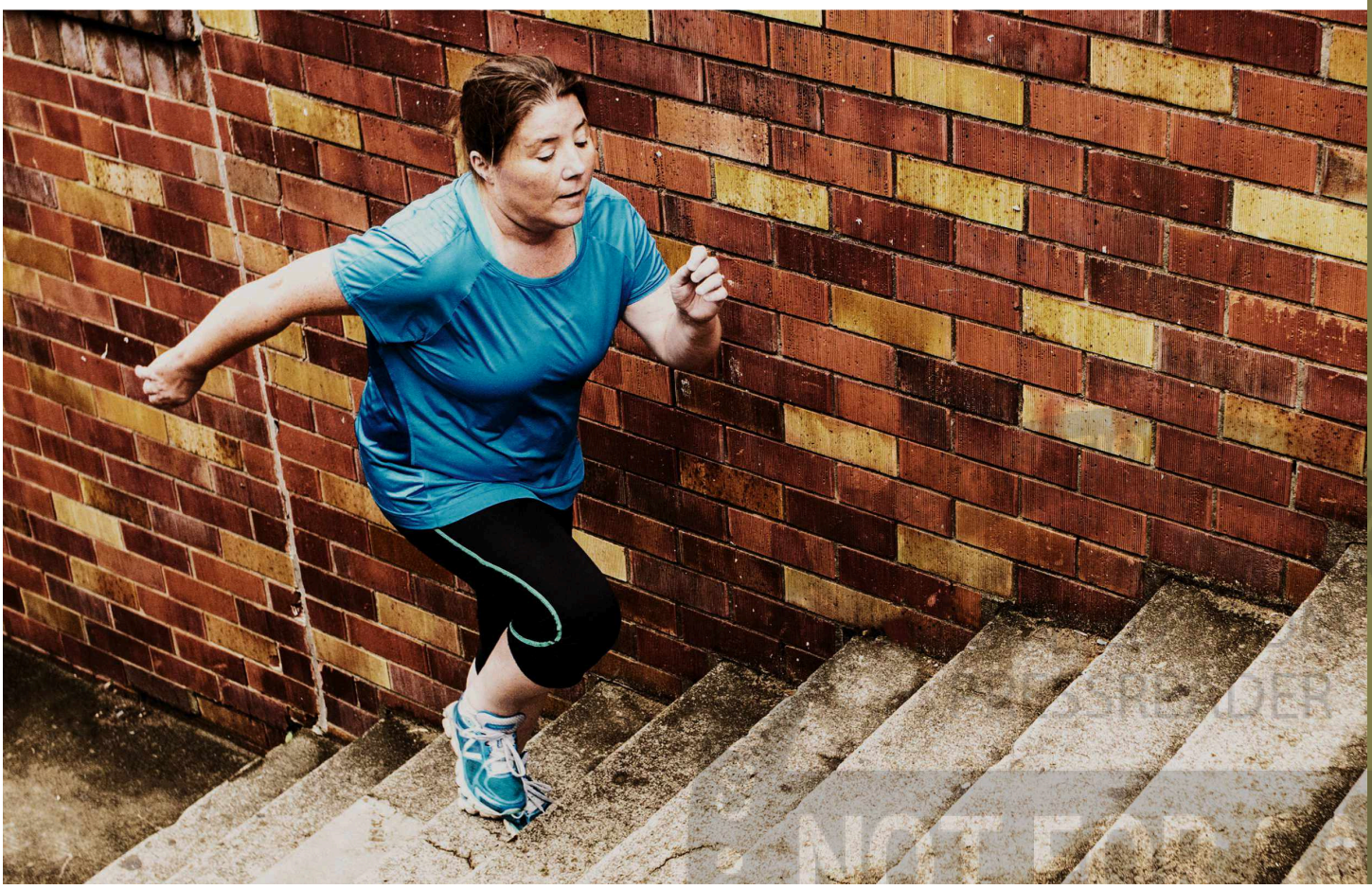
But he admits that the techniques they're using aren't perfect and that they're hoping they'll soon be able to combine movement data with physiological data – heart rates, for example – to get a more accurate picture of what people are doing. "This is a work in progress," he says. "I think we're about two to three years away and we know it's going to add accuracy to our predictions."

Still, based on what we know already, can we ditch the Lycra as long as we're blazing around the supermarket at top speed? Well, ideally not. None of the experts say short bursts of activity should be seen as a substitute for more traditional exercise regimes, which have proven health benefits.

"This isn't about competing," says Stamatakis. "Our main audience is people who, for whatever reason, can't initiate and stick to an exercise programme."

On the other hand, even if you're the sort who devours hour-long workouts for breakfast, you could still treat yourself to the odd snack once in a while. **SF**

by **HAYLEY BENNETT**
Hayley is a science writer based in Bristol, UK.



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