

A NEW YEAR, A NEW

YOU



The calendar changes but you still see the old you in the mirror with your old habits and frustrations.

Here are some tips to finally get yourself on track and make this year the game-changer.

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It's one of the quirks of humans that when we pin a new calendar to the wall, the blank pages remind us that a full year of potential is ahead. We can shed all our bad habits as we greet the new year with fresh eyes.

However, we know that despite our best intentions, our struggles to eat better, exercise more and become a better, healthier person, often fails. Whether we want to give up ice cream-on-the-couch or be better at saving money, our enthusiasm often turns to frustration before St. Valentine's Day.

Do we lack will-power? Are we just lazy? Do chocolate-glazed donuts, ketchup potato chips and cigarettes have such a strong hold on us that we shouldn't even try?

Set Goals and Stick to Them

Dr. Karyn Hood, a Toronto clinical psychologist, has been treating patients with stress and anxiety, mood disorders, relationship difficulties and weight and health issues for more than a decade.

"The key to effective goal-setting is to set reasonable and achievable goals that can be broken down into smaller steps," Hood says. "This approach can make you feel more successful and provides a strategy or road map to follow."

She says someone proclaiming an absolute goal like they'll 'never eat another potato chip starting in 2019,' can sabotage their intentions and, if this happens, people may see their goal as unattainable.

"The problem with having an absolute rule for a goal is that, if you are unable to maintain that abstinence, then the minute you make a slip you end up feeling guilty and weak or like a failure. This mindset can derail your progress, leaving yourself feeling discouraged and more likely to drop the goal altogether," Hood says.

To use the potato chip example, she would suggest instead of going cold turkey, estimate how many you are currently eating per week and make a plan to cut back your consumption in a graduated fashion (such as one less bag a week) over a period of time. At the same time, you could substitute your chip consumption for healthier snack options (like a few whole-grain baked crackers or a handful of almonds).

“Remember to keep the steps small and achievable. This way you tend to feel successful for achieving the smaller steps or sub-goals and it helps to keep you motivated and moving towards your ultimate end goal,” she says.

What’s also important is to have a plan to deal with potential temptations that keep you heading to the junk food cupboard or away from the gym. Knowing in advance what excuses might keep you off track helps you plan a strategy of what to do when those obstacles inevitably crop up.

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DR. KARYN HOOD,
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Strategy Over Willpower

Willpower, discipline and control are factors to be down-played when confronting bad habits or addictions, she says. Not being able to get to the gym three to four times this week as you promised does not make you a weak person. Instead, she has found that a general rule of thumb for effective goal setting is strategy over willpower. You are more likely to achieve your desired goal if you have a reasonable, step-by-step approach and you have the support of others.

“Enlisting professional support can be key,” says Hood, “particularly when tackling a longstanding issue or psychological problem like an addiction rather than going it alone.”

Hood also says some people benefit by using the “accountability factor.” That is, having someone else to help them stay motivated and on track with their goal. It might be easy to make excuses and skip the gym on some mornings, but for some, not showing up when their gym buddy is waiting is a social bond they can’t break — and if that helps them be more consistent with their routine, then that’s great.

Get Your Finances in Order

Some people might have a goal to gain better control of their finances, save money or plan for retirement. Laima Alberings, a Tax and Estate Planner with TD Wealth, says many people want to be better at money management but for a variety of reasons, they just can’t do it.

One thing that is preventing them could be their familiarity and comfort with money concepts. She says while many Canadians are successful in their own fields, their lack of financial literacy often prevents them from investigating the state of their financial affairs. No one wants to feel ignorant so — as long as short-term bills are paid and pay cheques keep people above water — people can put off financial planning for another day, Alberings says.

This leads to head-in-the-sand behaviour which in turn makes a bad financial situation worse. Becoming more adept at drawing up financial plans should be on everyone’s to-do list.

“Just like any other resolution like weight loss or planning a vacation, you need to review your habits, you have to find out what has been working for you and what hasn’t been working for you,” she says.

Alberings says people can raise their financial literacy by reading the papers, going to the library, reading Canadian-focused financial blogs or talking to a financial professional, she says.

Otherwise, if you are unfamiliar with the basic concepts, you may find it difficult to make any decisive financial plans.

One of the New Year's resolutions people have is to be better savers. Alberings says that being a better saver begins with having a budget and the best method to do this is to have a financial app or some kind of tracker or software that records everything you buy.

That way you can see if you are spending too much on lunches at work or entertainment Saturday nights, for example, and make plans to cut back on the spending you can control.

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LAIMA ALBERINGS,
TAX AND ESTATE PLANNER,
TD WEALTH.

“You might say, you know what? I’m not going out every weekend. I’ll cut back to every other weekend,” she says.

She says another area that people should concentrate on come January is to getting their retirement plan under control — people are often too busy with day-to-day issues to sit back and think about long-term events like retirement, so those plans can be continually pushed aside until “tomorrow”.

She says often people sign up for an RSP but don’t contribute every year or move on to a different plan with a different investment outlook. She says it’s not unusual to have several RSP accounts with no coordination between them.

Alberings agrees with Dr. Hood when she recommends that some changes in behaviour need professional help and support. Just like a doctor can help tune in on what health factors you should take care of — weight,

blood pressure, cholesterol — a financial professional can identify which financial issues an individual should work on. This can include retirement, debt-reduction or saving for a better, less-stressful year ahead.

— **Don Sutton, MoneyTalk Life**

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