

Just 8% of People Achieve Their New Year's Resolutions. Here's How They Do It.

(NOTE: Although this was a post in FORBES in January of 2013, these suggestions and ideas still apply today, as we prepare for 2016.)

Let me guess: You want to lose weight in the New Year, or maybe just eat healthier. Perhaps you want to spend less money or spend more time with your friends and family. I know I do.

Self-improvement, or at least the desire for it, is a shared American hobby. It's why so many of us—some estimates say more than 40% of Americans—make New Year's resolutions. (For comparison, about one-third of Americans watch the Super Bowl.)

But for all the good intentions, only a tiny fraction of us keep our resolutions; University of Scranton research suggests that just [8% of people](#) achieve their New Year's goals.

Why do so many people fail at goal-setting, and what are the secrets behind those who succeed? The explosion of studies into how the brain works has more experts attempting to explain the science behind why we make resolutions—and more relevantly, how we can keep them.

Keep it Simple

Many people use the New Year as an opportunity to make large bucket lists or attempt extreme makeovers, whether personal or professional.

That's a nice aspiration, experts say—but the average person has so many competing priorities that this type of approach is doomed to failure. Essentially, shooting for the moon can be so psychologically daunting, you end up failing to launch in the first place.

So "this year, I'm keeping my resolution list short," says Chris Berdik, a science journalist and the author of "[Mind Over Mind](#)." "I think my earlier laundry lists made it easier to abandon."

And it's more sensible to set "small, attainable goals throughout the year, rather than a singular, overwhelming goal," [according](#) to psychologist Lynn Bufka. "Remember, it is not the extent of the change that matters, but rather the act of recognizing that lifestyle change is important and working toward it, one step at a time," Bufka adds.

Make it Tangible

Setting ambitious resolutions can be fun and inspiring, but the difficulty in achieving them means that your elation can quickly give way to frustration. That's why goals should be bounded by rational, achievable metrics.

"A resolution to *lose some weight* is not that easy to follow," [notes Roy Baumeister](#), a social psychologist. "It is much easier to follow a plan that says no potato chips, fries, or ice cream for six weeks."

And be specific. Don't say you're "going to start going to the gym" in 2013—set a clear ambition, like attending a weekly spin class or lifting weights every Tuesday or Thursday.

"We say if you can't measure it, it's not a very good resolution because vague goals beget vague resolutions," [says](#) John Norcross of the University of Scranton.

Make it Obvious

Experts recommend charting your goals in some fashion, although there's no universal strategy for success. For some, making a clear to-do list is enough of a reminder; others rely on "[vision boards](#)" or personal diaries.

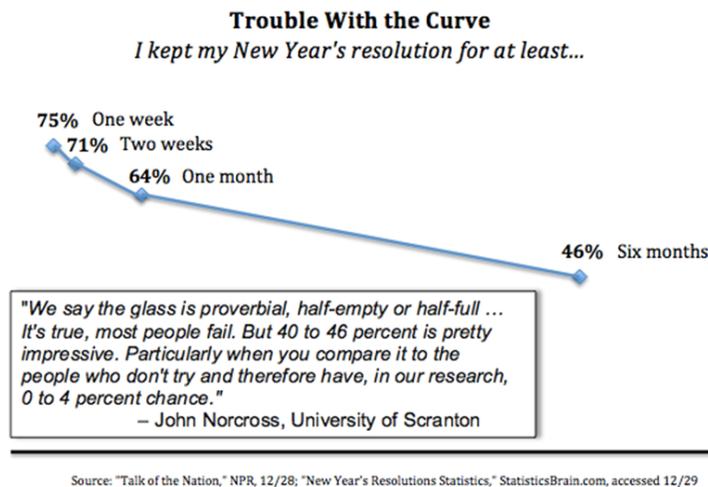
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An emerging tactic: share your goals with your friends and family. It's another way to build accountability, especially in the Facebook era.

For example, after a woman named Anna Newell Jones ran more than \$23,600 into debt, she made a New Year's resolution to work her way out of it—and publicly. As part of that effort, Newell Jones launched a blog, [And Then We Saved](#), to chronicle her attempt to go from shopaholic to spendthrift; in less than a year and a half, she'd paid off her debt.

My friend Rivka Friedman, who authors a cooking blog called Not Derby Pie, used a similar tactic several years ago: She posted her "[kitchen resolutions](#)." You can still see them on the right-hand side of the blog, as Rivka either crossed off her accomplishments or hyperlinked to blog posts, like her efforts to learn how to "[make kimchi](#)" or "[fillet a fish \(properly\)](#)."

Sharing the resolutions "was a good way to hold myself to them," Rivka told me. And "in our increasingly [public] lives, social media can be used as a motivator," she argues. **Keep Believing You Can Do It**
To be clear: Simply setting a goal *does* raise your chances of achieving that goal, significantly. But within weeks or months, people begin abandoning their resolutions as they hit bumps in the road that throw them off their stride.



More often than not, people who fail to keep their resolutions blame their own lack of willpower. In surveys, these would-be resolvers repeatedly say that if only they had more self-determination, they would've overcome any hurdles and achieved their goals.

But writing at the *Los Angeles Times*, Berdik [points to](#) an emerging body of research that willpower *is* malleable. In one study led by a Stanford University psychologist, scientists gauged whether test subjects believed they could exhaust their willpower, and sought to convince them otherwise. The researchers found that people "performed better or worse [on tests] depending on their belief in the durability of willpower."

You have as much willpower as you think you have, essentially. Which means that on some level, your journey toward self-improvement will be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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